

The Joy of Creating Excellent Relationships

**An Introduction for Youth Approximately Ages 15-18
Based on the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith**

A Service of Marriage Transformation®

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Submitting Suggested Edits

This is a learning-in-action document, and helpful and constructive feedback and suggested edits from those using it are welcome and encouraged.

Note About Content

The content in this handout is primarily for unmarried individuals who are Bahá'ís, involved with a Bahá'í, or already somewhat familiar with the Bahá'í Faith. It could be covered in a full-day session or in sections over a period of time. If the workshop time is only about 3 hours long, then you may wish to read only some quotations and focus on sections 2, 4, 5 and 6, with mention of the rest being available for self-study or follow-up group discussion.

This is general and somewhat introductory material. People wishing to prepare for relationships and materials in more depth are encouraged to access the resources listed on the final page of this document.

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POSSIBLE OPENING DEVOTIONS

Music

Prayer for Youth

O Lord! Make this youth radiant, and confer Thy bounty upon this poor creature. Bestow upon him knowledge, grant him added strength at the break of every morn and guard him within the shelter of Thy protection so that he may be freed from error, may devote himself to the service of Thy Cause, may guide the wayward, lead the hapless, free the captives and awaken the heedless, that all may be blessed with Thy remembrance and praise. Thou art the Mighty and the Powerful.

~ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Bahá’í Prayers*, p. 37-38)

Music Videos:

Unity Prayer	Cocker Brothers	http://bahaiblog.net/site/2016/05/unity-prayer-cocker-brothers/
Unity Prayer	JC, Nabil & Karim	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cGIGyjDfjQ
Unite	Ali Youssefi	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfPzUZ_25yw

1 - Assessing the Present Reality

We live in a world that bombards us with pictures, videos, and words that intend to define relationships for us today. Most often, the messages include or are dominated by sex, and pornography is epidemic. The sexual images are constant and all-surrounding—from the magazine and book racks in stores, to TV and the Internet, to our schools and workplaces. Aggression, violence, and infidelity in relationships and marriages are common. We can often pay more attention to looks and body shape rather than the quality of our own or someone else's character.

We often adopt behaviors because of the examples we see in people and media and because we think that behavior is expected of us. These behaviors may meet needs of our immediate physical desires (including sexual ones) and are lower nature needs. The idea of having a baby of our own is at times a powerful need we may feel as well. And all of this is at a time when there are significant world problems and a noticeable increase in family breakdown and marriages often end in divorce. It is hard at times to have authentic conversations with adults in our lives and adults to observe who live a life that models healthy character choices and relationships.

In the midst of this very difficult situation, we have the guidance from the Bahá'í Writings and messages from the Universal House of Justice asking us to lift our eyes and souls higher and find ways of behaving that are dramatically different than what we often see practiced around us. They want us to strengthen friendship skills and practice “rectitude of conduct.” The Universal House of Justice also reminds us that for decades, Shoghi Effendi's words encouraged the Bahá'ís to live pure, chaste, and holy lives. Why? Why does chastity matter so much? What does it look like and feel like to practice chastity today? What does it mean to be holy? To be pure? How do our lives generate light rather than connect to the forces of darkness that are so strong in the world? How do we live up to the standards in the Writings that often seem very difficult to achieve?

The terms below will arise throughout this handout. These brief working definitions will begin the process of understanding them:

Chastity is maintaining sexual purity and reserving sexual attraction, responses, and intimacy as a special and respectful gift to share with a marriage partner.

Friendliness is demonstrating an outgoing and positive social attitude and reaching out to connect with and build relationships with people.

Holiness is nurturing your heart and soul through maintaining a close, interactive relationship with God, drawing on spiritual sources for divine guidance, dedicated or devoted to the service of God or religion, and acting and speaking in alignment with the teachings in the Word of God.

Purity is maintaining personal physical cleanliness, a clean and orderly environment, uplifting and chaste thoughts, positive words, honest motivations, a loving heart, and a spiritually focused soul.

It will take all of us together to understand how to have friendships and relationships that are positive, as well as to heal and learn from those that did not work well. It will take effort to learn how to have a happy, spiritually-based marriage. We need to experience the joys and benefits of living a life in alignment with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And we have to figure out how to move forward when our choices of partner or our own behavior turn out to be unwise ones. None of us is perfect at this process. We just keep trying our best one day at a time.

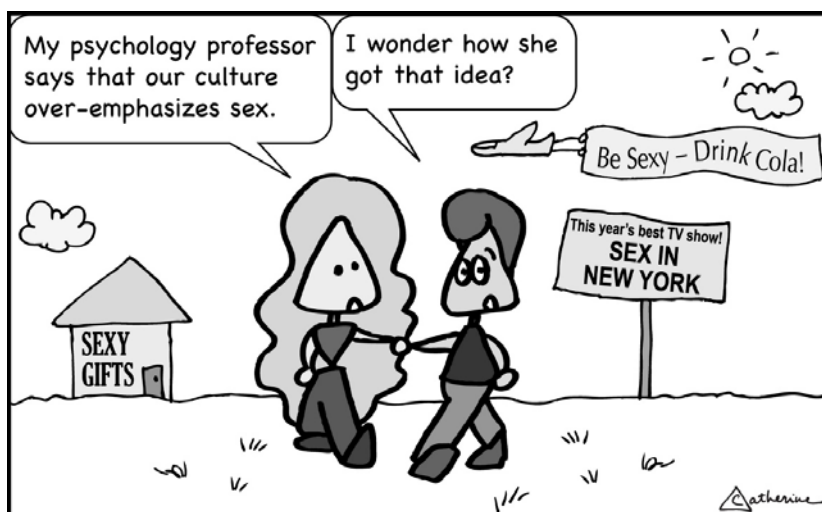
The Bahá'í teachings can help us to build a better world. Instead of accepting society as it is, we can start a process of individual, community, and global transformation influenced by the quality of our personal and relationship choices. Together.

Quotations for Guidance

1. “The world today is submerged, amongst other things, in an over-exaggeration of the importance of physical love, and a dearth of spiritual values. In as far as possible the believers should try to realize this and rise above the level of their fellow-men who are, typical of all decadent periods in history, placing so much over-emphasis on the purely physical side of mating.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I, p. 57, #147)
2. “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)

Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do we need reminders for how to speak and act with others?
2. What are some of the most significant challenges to creating a spiritually-centered relationship today?
3. What attitudes would be helpful to develop towards marriage? What makes this difficult? What helps with keeping our attitude positive?



2 - Developing Excellent Friendships

We have many friendships in our lives, some deeper than others, and with both males and females. Friendships can enrich our lives and provide great companionship. We often enjoy building cross-gender relationships. When there are clear responsible self-restraints and boundaries that eliminate or reduce premature sexual invitation and contact, males and females can better relax and easily feel free to be friends with each other.

Friendships are also one of the most challenging parts of life sometimes. It's hard trying to figure out whom to be friends with, whether someone is a true friend to us, whether to be with the people who seem more popular, or whether to stick with being with people more like ourselves. Sometimes it is difficult to start friendships with people outside of the circle of friends we already have. Sometimes we can feel lonely and insecure when apart from friends. Sometimes being alone seems like the best thing. Sometimes we forget about the importance of maintaining friendships with others when we are in a romantic relationship. It can be easy (and misleading) to think our partner alone is enough.

Today we often maintain our friendships through texting, Facebook, instant messaging, cellphones, and so on. It is wise for us to also make sure we develop our skills with having in-person conversations, something that is very important in relationships. It is also a vital skill as we engage broadly in life with restaurant servers, prospective employers, coworkers, neighbors, store clerks, and more. The process is synergistic: When we are friendly and make friendships at the neighborhood and community level, we build skills that help us in relationships and later in marriage.

Friendships that go beyond just being social with each other, where we feel respected and have trust in each other, can be truer and deeper. When we feel we are adding value to our friend's life in some way, or we are both better people when we are together, there is a greater connection. When we share thoughts about life, God, or whatever is important to us, we understand each other better. When we are helpful to others in our lives, it can strengthen our friendships with them, too. Friendships should be mutually helpful and respectful, and include trust, encouragement, cooperation, and fun.

Quotations for Guidance

1. "Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path." ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Paris Talks*, p. 16)
2. "...[M]an and woman should truly be friends, and should be in sympathy with one another. Their understanding should have a basis in reality..." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by The Universal House of Justice in a letter dated March 26, 1985, in Agnes Ghaznavi's book *Sexuality, Relationships and Spiritual Growth*, p. 121)
3. "The love of God has brought us together, and this is the best of means and motive. Every other bond of friendship is limited in effectiveness, but fellowship based upon the love of God is unlimited, everlasting, divine and radiant." ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 442)
4. "You must love your friend better than yourself; yes, be willing to sacrifice yourself." ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 218)
5. "...[M]arriage should lead to a profound friendship of spirit..." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, #689)
6. "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

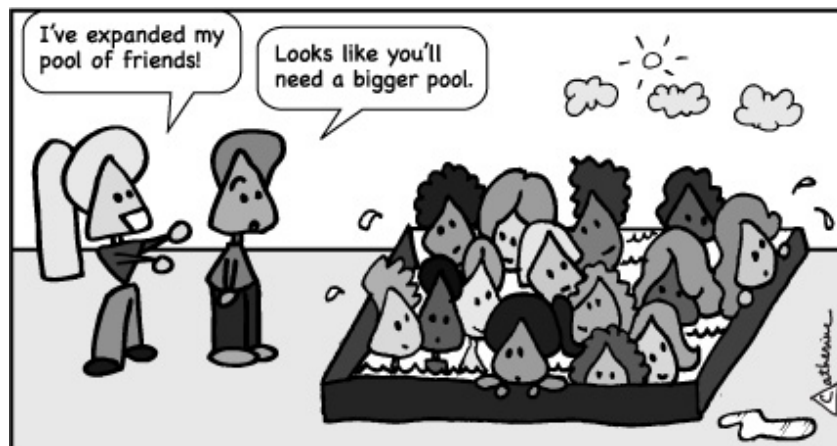
cooperation of others in common service to the Faith and society, and to convert into action the decisions made by consultative bodies.” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1996)

7. “[E]stablish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010, para 3)
8. “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.” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010, para. 4)
9. “Chastity in no way implies withdrawal from human relationships. It liberates people from the tyranny of the ubiquity* of sex. A person who is in control of his sexual impulses is enabled to have profound and enduring friendships with many people, both men and women, without ever sully that unique and priceless bond that should unite man and wife.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I, “A Chaste and Holy Life”*, p. 51)

* Defined as “present everywhere”

Reflection and Discussion

1. What does it mean to have a relationship or friendship with a “basis in reality”?
2. What are key qualities in excellent friendships?
3. What do you value about the friendships that you have?
4. What can you do to strengthen a friendship you currently have? What helps you keep a friend over time?
5. How can you expand your circle of friends? Why would this be a good action to take?
6. What are your favorite activities to do with friends?
7. What do you do to build trust with a friend? When have you felt a friend violated your trust? How did you feel about this? How did you respond?
8. What are the signs that you would be wise to end a friendship?
9. Have you seen a friendship that became a relationship? How did that turn out? What challenges did the couple encounter? How did they resolve them?
10. What value do you see in having friendships with the opposite gender? What would be the benefits of having a marriage with friendship as a foundation?



3 - Communicating in Friendships and Relationships

How well (or poorly!) we communicate affects all our relationships. Beyond the complexities of using our words effectively, communication also includes such things as connecting spiritually through prayer, tone of voice, eye contact, body language, and facial expressions. It takes effort and awareness to make sure that the people we are communicating with receive the message that we intend. Our goal must be to build unity and create constructive action, not involve ourselves in idle or destructive talk.

We also have consultation skills to learn, as this is the method Bahá'u'lláh has given us for making decisions. It involves full and equal discussion between two or more people. The participants focus on a common goal—what is best to do. Consultation helps people to tune into spiritual inspiration, explore thoughts, feelings, and goals, as well as absorb new information. It assists with clarifying situations, resolving disagreements, and making decisions about actions to take. It includes sharing points of view and finding solutions that work, without blaming, arguing, or telling others what to do. People often believe that it's normal and acceptable, especially in relationships, to fight with each other. Since Bahá'u'lláh has forbidden conflict and contention, well-developed consultation skills can help people have discussions with solutions instead of fighting.

The advice from the Jewish and Christian scriptures still has strong applicability today: “A gentle response allays wrath; a harsh word provokes anger.” (Proverbs 15:1; *Tanakh* p. 1308) If we control our responses even to someone else's anger, we are more likely to be able to have a calm discussion and resolve conflict without escalation. We guard our own actions and mouths and in turn help others to guard and be aware of theirs.

Communication works better when we are also good at listening. If we rearrange the letters of LISTEN they form the word SILENT. Silence makes it possible to listen fully to our friends and partners with our ears, mind, eyes, and heart, and to see something from the other's perspective. By listening fully, we can help them feel respected, loved, and appreciated. Our friends and partners will gain confidence in what they are saying and feel more loving towards us. The gift of our full attention encourages them to listen well to us in return.

Encouragement, praise, and positive words are the best glue for relationships of all types. These lift us up and help us keep moving forward in live in good directions. One common challenge as we build friendships and relationships is avoiding backbiting or harmful gossiping. These types of communications can harm us and others as well. It is also important to not automatically believe that someone else is speaking about us.

Backbiting refers to speaking in a negative, spiteful, put-down way about a person who is not present. Even when the words are true, the intent and effect are destructive, creating disunity and damaging someone's reputation, whether or not the person spoken of finds out what we said. Before speaking, it is wise to ask whether the words will make “smaller” the person spoken about, in the view of the person who is listening. Would the person spoken about dislike and become unhappy about what is said? If so, then we are best to consider staying quiet. Friendships and relationships work best where there is respect, acceptance, compassion, loyalty, friendliness, justice, kindness, truthfulness, and unity.

It is better to communicate about issues directly with someone than to speak about others behind their backs. **Gossip** involves spreading personal or sensational information that may or may not have some basis in truth, but which is often inaccurate or incomplete. The intent and outcome are often harmful. When we know something interesting about another person, it is very tempting to share it with others to draw attention to ourselves and feel important. However, it is often damaging. Go to the person involved to smooth out conflict and build unity. If you need guidance, try to do so with a third person while keeping the person involved anonymous if possible. However, attempt to work out all concerns directly as soon as possible to avoid bitterness and hurt.

In-depth training in communication is beyond the scope of this document. However, there are some fundamental spiritual principles that will guide us, and we will advance in some skills as well.

Quotations for Guidance

1. “Consort with all men...in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindliness and good-will.” (Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 289)
2. “Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom....” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143)
3. “...[T]he tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century. ...[R]egard backbiting as grievous error, and keep...aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting queneth 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)
4. “...[C]onsultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 72)
5. “In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #751)
6. “...[W]hen a believer is uncertain about his affairs, or when he seeketh to pursue a project or trade, the friends should gather together and devise a solution for him. He, in his turn, should act accordingly. Likewise in larger issues, when a problem ariseth, or a difficulty occurreth, the wise should gather, consult, and devise a solution. They should then rely upon the one true God, and surrender to His Providence, in whatever way it may be revealed, for divine confirmations will undoubtedly assist.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Consultation*, pp. 96-97; *Fire & Gold*, p. 270)
7. “Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that ‘Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.’” (The Universal House of Justice, December 29, 1988, “Individual Rights and Freedoms”, pp. 12-13)
8. “One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise. When this is done, one can be a friend to the whole human race. If, however, we look at people from the standpoint of their faults, then being a friend to them is a formidable task.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 168)

9. “Do not complain of others. Refrain from reprimanding them, and if you wish to give admonition or advice, let it be offered in such a way that it will not burden the bearer. Turn all your thoughts toward bringing joy to hearts. Beware! Beware! lest ye offend any heart.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 453)

Reflection and Discussion

1. How should we interact with people we are speaking with regardless of their attitude or tone of voice?
2. How should we respond to people who disagree with us or refuse to listen to us?
3. How have praise and encouragement affected us?
4. What is the effect of backbiting? Of gossip?
5. What is the purpose of consultation? What helps it work well?
6. What are some character qualities/virtues that are helpful for being a good communicator? What does Bahá’u’lláh ask us to do, and how can we act on it?

SKILL BUILDING

What follows below are some communication skills that may be helpful to learn.

Encouraging and Listening

As we have discussions, or consult about a decision to make, we may find that using the following phrases encourages one another and helps our effectiveness and the outcome:

- That is a good idea!
- I see what you mean.
- That is an interesting way of looking at it.
- We are looking at this issue from two different angles.
- That is a unique perspective!
- I would like to reflect on that.
- Let me see if I understand.
- I think I need a bit more explanation.
- Perhaps we could take a break and come back to this later.
- Could we pray, and then talk about it some more?
- What are the spiritual principles that apply to this situation?
- It seems as if it would be good to get some more facts.
- I am confused—can you please explain it again?
- Please, help me to understand.
- That was helpful to me!
- You may be right. It is possible that I may be wrong.

These phrases show that we are listening to each other, an important relationship skill. It also shows that we are aware of our own reactions and feelings and want to respect the person involved by giving the situation time while also asking to be respected by allowing ourselves to cool down. It may also be helpful to use active or reflective listening, where someone summarizes back to a speaker his/her understanding of what the speaker said. Listening helps us to understand what each person is thinking and feeling.

Signs of Spiritual Immaturity and Behavior Potentially Damaging to Others

We will likely find it difficult to get along with or trust a friend or relationship partner, or reach a decision smoothly, if we do any of these hurtful behaviors:

- Interrupt
- Force our viewpoint on the other
- Deliberately bring up the other's hurtful "hot button" issues
- Imply or state that one is right and that the other is wrong
- Have a competitive win-lose attitude
- Insult or blame one another
- Be sarcastic
- Conceal key information
- Be forceful or dominating in words or tone
- Walk away (unless there is danger of violence)
- Answer the telephone and carry on a conversation or text message with someone else
- Belittle, minimize or invalidate the other's point of view or feelings
- Point a finger or use other aggressive gestures or overly dramatic postures
- Dictate by saying, "you should," "you must," "you have to," or "you can't"
- Threaten anyone verbally, emotionally, physically, or sexually
- Threaten to end the relationship to manipulate someone

If any of these negative actions are occurring regularly, it is a sign that there are fundamental communication skills and attitudes lacking that could lead to problems in the friendship or relationship. It may be practical to ask the question, "Do we need to set new boundaries for ourselves and learn better methods of problem solving?" If there is an impasse in coming together reasonably, it is wise to get some outside assistance with resolving the matter as well as develop better skills and habits.

Adjusting Your Tone of Voice

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 words and tone of voice do not match, usually you will believe the tone.

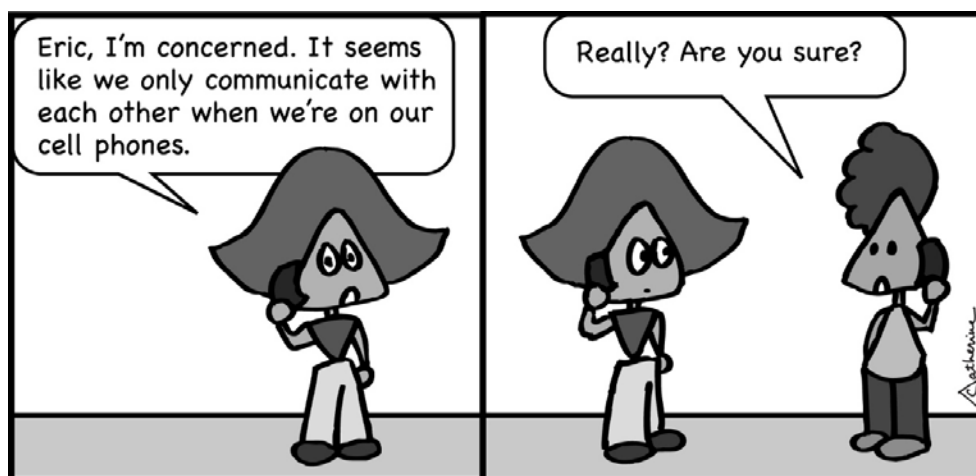
As each of you increase your understanding of and skill with matching your own tones of voice with your words, you will notice that your trust in each other's words increases. You are also more able to "coach" one another with gentle feedback and communicate effectively about your concerns. As you talk 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.

Activity: The purpose of this activity is to understand how tone of voice affects your communications. 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.

Phrases to use:

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



4 – Considering Dating with Spiritual Values

Someday dating might be different than it is today, as society evolves spiritually. However, we must still do our best to act based on spiritual principles in today's world and be an example.

We will each reach our own conclusions about participating in friendship, dating, and courting from reviewing the quotations below, consulting with appropriate and trusted others, and learning from experience and any other spiritual guidance that comes over time. If we choose to date, we will likely find it easier to be with people who have similar likes and values to us and who have many character strengths. Otherwise, the relationship becomes one of struggle and constant negotiation. For example, it is easier to relax and become friends with someone when there is not pressure to be involved sexually. If we are clear about our limits, it can avoid constant discussions about the topic or pressures to compromise our standards.

We will observe among others that dating and friendship-building can happen simultaneously, or a dating relationship can grow between two people who are already excellent friends. For some, it's not wise to start dating before friendship is established. New expectations, stressors, emotions, and physical awareness often occur when dating begins, and not having a good foundation of friendship can lead to blind participation, misunderstandings, and distraction. It can be a challenge to be honest with each other about the stage of a relationship and agree on where both want it to go. However, tactful honesty is in the best interests of both.

Some who choose to date may find it possible to date more than one person at once, if both agree that this is okay and there are clear boundaries that respect spiritual guidelines. Our parents may also have some influence on our choices. It is often difficult to determine at the beginning of dating someone whether marriage is an eventual possibility. Beyond dating, we may wish to consider the process of courtship as an exclusive relationship stage that generally happens after we have decided that marriage between us is a possibility to investigate. When considering marriage, it would be unwise, disrespectful, and dishonest to even try to be involved with more than one person at a time. Couples when dating may also decide to be exclusive partners.

The steps that lead to relationships and marriage will vary from person to person as we strive to understand and follow the guidance.

Quotations for Guidance

1. “Beware lest ye commit that which would sadden the hearts of your fathers and mothers. Follow ye the path of Truth which indeed is a straight path.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Lights of Guidance*, #768)
2. “[T]he youth, in particular, must constantly and determinedly strive to exemplify Bahá'í life. In the world around us we see moral decay, promiscuity, indecency, vulgarity, bad manners—the Bahá'í young people must be the opposite of these things, and, by their chastity, their uprightness, their decency, their consideration and good manners, attract others, old and young, to the Faith. The world is tired of words; it wants example, and it is up to the Bahá'í youth to furnish it.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'í Youth who attended the Green Acre Summer School August 4, 1946, September 19, 1946; *Lights of Guidance*, #2155)
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: A letter February 5, 1992, to an individual; published in *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, 3rd ed., p. 130)

4. The following is a letter written by the Universal House of Justice in response to an inquiry from a father about his sons:

“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. In this context, we offer the following comments.

“Although a Bahá'í may, if he chooses, seek his parents' advice on the choice of a partner, and although Bahá'í parents may give such advice if asked, it is clear from the Teachings that parents do not have the right to interfere in their children's actual choice of a prospective partner until approached for their consent to marry. Therefore, when discussing the issue of courtship with your sons, it would be best to discuss it on the level of principle without reference to individuals.

“In the context of the society in which your family now lives, a society in which materialism, self-centeredness and failing marriages are all too common, your sons may well feel that it is wise to have a long period of courtship in which the prospective partners spend much time together and become thoroughly acquainted with each other's character, background and family. This practice does not in itself contradict Bahá'í law and, as it is not unacceptable in ... [country name removed], it appears to be a viable option. As you are aware, Bahá'u'lláh ordained that Bahá'í engagement should not exceed 95 days, and, although this law has not yet been applied universally*, it highlights the desirability of marrying quickly once the decision to marry has been firmly taken and parental consent obtained. However, in a relationship in which such a decision has not been taken and in which the law of chastity is strictly observed, there is no objection, in principle, to a prolonged friendship in which the two individuals entertain the possibility of marrying each other at some time in the future.

“You have mentioned that your sons like to invite their girlfriends to spend a lot of time with the family and that you are not entirely happy with this situation. Each family member has rights which should be respected, and if you wish to have some time in your home without the presence of non-family members, the other members of your family should take this seriously into consideration. However, we hasten to point out to you that the situation which you describe, in which your sons wish their friends to be involved with your family, is much more in line with the Teachings than the common pattern in Western countries in which many youth virtually exclude their parents from interacting with their peers, sometimes distancing themselves from their families in order to have the freedom to engage in frivolous and even unchaste behavior....”

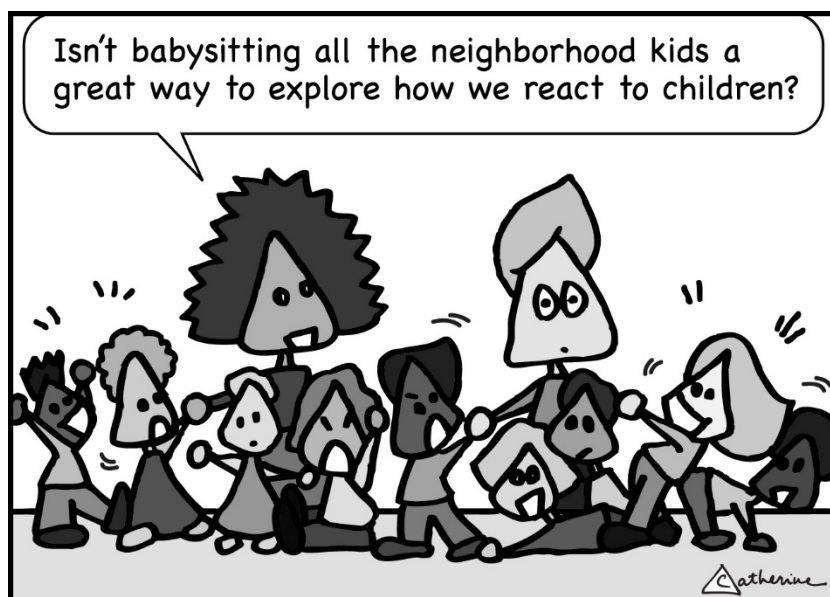
(Universal House of Justice: A letter August 28, 1994, to an individual; published in *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, 3rd ed., p. 141)

* For information about whether the 95-day engagement law applies to you, contact your Spiritual Assembly for guidance.

5. Note that the following was not written about relationships or marriage but is a useful principle to consider applying: “...[T]urn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress.” (Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors, December 28, 2010)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think a model of Bahá'í dating might look like different from what you are seeing happening with your peers now?
2. Is dating something that you would or would not do? Why or why not?
3. If you are experiencing fear about dating, what would help you to practice courage?
4. What do you see as appropriate and respectful behavior on a date?
5. How would you know that your partner has an attitude of equality with you?
6. What types of activities help you get to know each other's character?
7. How could we use consultation during friendship, dating, and courting with the intent of determining whether to marry?
8. What are some signs of an excellent relationship?
9. What could be signs of problems in a relationship?
10. What might stop you from breaking off a relationship, even though there were signs of problems?
11. What actions or practices can help you transform fear of stopping a relationship into courage to end it?
12. What are the characteristics of an excellent relationship with your parents?
13. What might qualify as parental "interference"? What ways are there for parents to have input without interfering? How could you communicate to a parent when you feel his/her actions are interfering?



5 - Understanding and Strengthening Character

Developing a good character, the process of developing our virtues, is a theme throughout all of the Bahá'í teachings and those of other faiths. Developing our characters involves making daily choices and assessing how effectively our choices match with spiritual guidance. Character affects every interaction we have with others, so of course it affects all aspects of our relationships with friends, relationship partners, and parents.

Character is:

- The sum of all the qualities we develop throughout our lives as we make choices about how to speak and act
- The spiritual essence of who we are as a human being
- Our moral compass or ethical strength that provides the unwavering drive to choose what is right, even when that choice could cause us difficulties, and even if no one else is watching us or knows what we are doing

Our reputation is what others think about us. Our character is who we truly are. We should strive to have our honest character be reflected in our reputation. The younger we are, the easier it is to change our character. While transformation is always possible, the foundation of our character is generally in place by the time we leave our teens.

When we assess the character of others to see whether they are good potential partners, we can look for how consistently they behave with everyone, and not just how they treat us. For instance, how we treat our parents can be a clear indicator of how we will treat a partner over time. The goal is to become “thoroughly acquainted” with one another’s character. We cannot enter a relationship or marriage thinking that our partner will substantially change or that we can “fix” character weaknesses. We can encourage and influence change, but character change can be slow and difficult and is always a personal choice.

Becoming thoroughly acquainted with the character of a partner is a primary requirement for Bahá'ís who are dating, courting, and considering marriage. In virtually every other circumstance, the guidance from the Writings is to overlook negative aspects about someone and just focus on the positive. Consider that the guidance before marriage seems to be different. If you ignore significant character weaknesses in a partner, will you be able to successfully establish a happy, harmonious marriage that is of service to others? Might you instead be mired in internal conflict and problems? It is also important to consider the compatibility of your strengths. Someone very creative might need to be partnered with someone just as creative, or it may work better if he/she is excellent at peacefulness and encouragement.

Some Bahá'ís have a tendency to use the phrase “We’re *investigating* each other’s character.” Consider that investigating has a tone of digging out secrets, doubting the honesty of the other, and looking for the negative. Instead, consider that becoming “*thoroughly acquainted*” or “*ascertaining knowledge*” (quotations below) invites couples to engage in a wide variety of activities with one another, interact with each other’s family, and participate in service together. The goal is to know one another well enough that there is a high level of confidence in the knowledge you hold of each other’s character.

As we meet new people and make friends, it will be a learning experience for us to carefully observe their character qualities and how interactions flow together. For example, one person could have the character strength of patience, but to a partner who likes to think and move quickly most of the time, this quality could seem irritating instead of a benefit. One could be very courageous, and their partner sees this as an excellent strength. Knowing ourselves well, and understanding character qualities very well, will provide a good foundation for being able to thoroughly know the character of a partner and assess our compatibility.

Quotations for Guidance

1. “The light of a good character surpasseth the light of the sun and the radiance thereof. Whoso attaineth unto it is accounted as a jewel among men. The glory and the upliftment of the world must needs depend upon it.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 36)
2. “In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man’s spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60)
3. “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. 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*, p. 118)
4. “In order to achieve this cordial unity one of the first essentials insisted on by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is that we resist the natural tendency to let our attention dwell on the faults and failings of others rather than on our own. Each of us is responsible for one life only, and that is our own. Each of us is immeasurably far from being ‘perfect as our heavenly father is perfect’ and the task of perfecting our own life and character is one that requires all our attention, our will-power and energy.” (Shoghi Effendi: *Living the Life*, pp. 3-4)
5. “There is a difference between character and faith; it is often very hard to accept this fact and put up with it, but the fact remains that a person may believe in and love [the Bahá’í Faith]—even to being ready to die for it—and yet not have a good personal character, or possess traits at variance with the teachings. We should try to change, to let the Power of God help recreate us and make us true Bahá’ís in deed as well as in belief. But sometimes the process is slow, sometimes it never happens because the individual does not try hard enough.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 440)
6. [Describing the first of three great fields of service for young Bahá’ís; the others are teaching and education/career preparation] “First, the foundation of all their other accomplishments is their study of the teachings, the spiritualization of their lives and the forming of their characters in accordance with the standards of Bahá’u’lláh. As the moral standards of the people around us collapse and decay...Bahá’ís must increasingly stand out as pillars of righteousness and forbearance. The life of a Bahá’í will be characterized by truthfulness and decency; he will walk uprightly among his fellowmen, dependent upon none save God, yet linked by bonds of love and brotherhood with all mankind; he will be entirely detached from the loose standards, the decadent theories, the frenetic experimentation, the desperation of present-day society, will look upon his neighbors with a bright and friendly face and be a beacon light and haven for all those who would emulate his strength of character and assurance of soul.” (Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, “Message to the Bahá’í Youth of the World”, pp. 93-94)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the value of knowing your own self? How can this self-knowledge help with knowing others?
2. How can you strengthen character qualities? How is developing your character a service to others?
3. How can having many character strengths affect your interactions with a relationship partner?
4. How do you know that you are actually beginning to understand your own character? A partner's character?
5. What gets in the way of becoming "thoroughly acquainted" with your own character? How can you overcome these challenges? What is easy and wonderful about discovering your own character?
6. What gets in the way of becoming "thoroughly acquainted" with the character of another person? How can you overcome these challenges? What is easy and wonderful about discovering the character of another person?
7. What roles could others, including your parents, play in the assessment of your own and another's character?
8. What character qualities are most important for you in a relationship partner? How would you identify that your partner practices these qualities consistently and effectively? That they are weak or not present?
9. What are some possible responses to discovering that a partner is weak at practicing a quality that is important to you?
10. How might discovering something you perceive as a weak character quality affect your relationship and interactions with a partner?
11. What absent or weak qualities in someone might make you hesitate to be in a relationship or married to him/her?
12. How are character and faith different? What might demonstrate that someone's faith is strong but his or her character is weak? What might demonstrate the reverse—a weak faith and strong character? What are your concerns about each scenario?
13. Once you start to know someone else's character, what do you do with this information? What are the spiritual principles that can guide your attitudes, words, and actions with the person?

SKILL BUILDING

Using Character Quality Language*

It helps to learn about each other's character when we use *Character Quality Language* to affirm specific qualities in each other. This practice also builds love, appreciation, and happiness between us, particularly when we are specific and sincere. Here are some simple examples:

- "Thank you for being (Helpful, Flexible, Truthful...)"
- "I appreciate your (Courage, Respect, Faithfulness...)"
- "I love how (Accepting, Enthusiastic, Encouraging...) you are!"

Below is an example of statements that we might say to a partner. The first is a positive statement similar to what we may already comfortably make. The second version uses Character Quality Language instead.

Good Statement:

"I am happy that you want to try some new activities with me!"

Better Statement Using Character Quality Language:

“I really appreciated how Enthusiastic and Courageous you were about going water skiing with me this weekend. I know you have not had much experience with being out on the lake in a boat, and I am happy when you are willing to try something new with me.”

The first statement is positive, and our partners will likely feel appreciated. However, the second, more powerful and specific statement acknowledges the partner and encourages continued practice of the character qualities.

Using Character Quality Language helps us to strengthen and keep practicing these qualities. Having someone notice our use of a quality encourages us to continue. It is often easier to criticize than to see and appreciate what someone does well. It takes practice to look consciously for someone’s positive actions and speak specifically about them, but it is worth the effort and very affirming for everyone involved.

* You may be familiar with “The Language of the Virtues” from The Virtues Project, which is similar (www.virtuesproject.com).

Activity: Observing and Identifying Character Qualities in a Relationship Partner

What possible character strengths do you spot in these scenarios?

- Your partner texts positive messages to you occasionally and calls and asks how your day went
- You plan dates and events together as a couple
- Your partner acknowledges and celebrates the special occasions in your life

What possible character weaknesses do you spot in these scenarios?

- Your partner doesn’t show up for a date and doesn’t communicate about it
- Your partner doesn’t introduce you when running into friends
- You are talking seriously together, and your partner starts texting friends or answering the phone
- Your partner regularly wants to touch you sexually

What character qualities could help make the following scenarios be successful?

- Visiting a friend in their home together
- Moving furniture together
- One partner loses a job
- Teaching your partner how to drive



Date: _____

Worksheet: Assessing Your Character Qualities

(Note: The assessment process with a partner is similar.)

Included with permission from: Marriage Transformation LLC; www.bahairelationships.com, www.marriagetransformation.com; susanne@marriagetransformation.com; excerpted from *Creating Excellent Relationships*

Purpose: To gain greater understanding of your own strengths of character and growth areas that need improvement, so you are empowered to prepare to be an excellent partner in a relationship.

Note: Go through this content slowly, carefully, and with prayer and reflection to increase your knowledge of yourself. In a group setting, focus on assessing about 10 qualities and finish the rest on your own.

Instructions:

- A) Place a number to the right of each character quality in the Rating column (you may wish to use a pencil), using the following assessment scale from 1 to 6:
- 1 ~ You are very weak at practicing the quality, and your words and actions are resulting in negative outcomes.
 - 2 ~ You are somewhat ineffective at practicing the quality, and your words and actions result in negative outcomes.
 - 3 ~ You are familiar with the quality, know quite well how to practice it, but you sometimes struggle to do so effectively.
 - 4 ~ You are practicing the quality effectively, but not consistently, and your words and actions usually result in positive outcomes.
 - 5 ~ You have the quality as a strength, but you frequently misuse it and cause harm [Use it to excess or in the wrong time or place].
 - 6 ~ You are consistently practicing the quality effectively, and your words and actions result in positive outcomes.
- B) Put a check mark (✓) next to those qualities on the worksheet that are clearly strengths (rated 4-6).
- C) Put an "x" next to the qualities that are too weak to practice effectively in a relationship (rated 1-3).
- D) Circle the four qualities that you now want to focus initially on developing in yourself. The qualities that you rated 1s, 2s, or 3s will be good choices for these four qualities.

Character Quality	Rating	✓ or x	Character Quality	Rating	✓ or x
Acceptance			Courtesy		
Assertiveness			Creativity		
Beauty			Detachment		
Caring			Discernment		
Chastity			Encouragement		
Commitment			Enthusiasm		
Compassion			Equality		
Confidence			Excellence		
Contentment			Faithfulness		
Cooperation			Flexibility		
Courage			Forgiveness		

Character Quality	Rating	✓ or x	Character Quality	Rating	✓ or x
Fortitude			Purity		
Friendliness			Purposefulness		
Generosity			Resilience		
Gentleness			Respect		
Helpfulness			Responsibility		
Honesty			Self-Discipline		
Humility			Service		
Idealism			Sincerity		
Integrity			Spirituality		
Joyfulness			Tactfulness		
Justice			Thankfulness		
Kindness			Thoughtfulness		
Love			Thriftiness		
Loyalty			Trustworthiness		
Mercy			Truthfulness		
Moderation			Unity		
Patience			Wisdom		
Peacefulness			Other:		
Perseverance			Other:		

Reflection:

1. What positive character qualities in me can be particular relationship strengths?

2. What character-related concerns do I see in myself?

3. What character strengths and resources will help me with addressing these concerns?

4. What unresolved issues from my past are now visible and need to be addressed?

Note: There are many other possible character qualities. These are ones of particular value in relationships. Details on each quality are available in *Creating Excellent Relationships: The Power of Character Choices*, www.marriagetransformation.com.

6 - Honoring Nobility with Purity and Chastity

One of the blessings about the Bahá'í writings is their message to us about our nobility as human beings. In a society that often degrades people and applauds them acting from their lower nature, we have the great bounty of knowing we have a soul and what behavior choices honor us and others. We have the character example of Bahá'u'lláh's children: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahíyyih Khánum to follow and live up to.

Purity and chastity are often linked together in the Bahá'í teachings. They have great power to transform our lives and influence the lives of others around us. They empower us to make self-respecting choices that bring us happiness and freedom from the guilt and pain that poor choices bring. Our consciences are clean when we make choices that align with spiritual guidance. We make choices that enhance our ability to establish a happy marriage. Depending on your experiences and what parents or others have taught you about purity and chastity, you may have a variety of thoughts and feelings about studying this topic. Pause for a moment and consider what these are.

Physical intimacies, including sexual touch and intercourse, have become the norm in dating relationships in many parts of the world for people of all ages and genders. When we care for someone, the pull to be physically intimate can be very strong. Popular media makes having sex very early in a relationship look like positive behavior. It also conveys inaccurately that making very fast decisions about the long-term viability of a relationship based on strong physical attraction is a positive choice. However, Bahá'u'lláh's laws restrict sexual expression to occurring within marriage. Practicing chastity means maintaining sexual purity and reserving sexual attraction, responses, and intimacy as a special and respectful gift to share with a marriage partner. It includes focusing on having a full and happy life where sex is less dominant. This is a different focus than one where the emphasis is on "abstinence" or saying "no" to your physical urges. If we can focus on where relationships are wonderful without sex, how much more will sex enhance and bring a new level of love and intimacy to our relationship in marriage?

Of course we *do* want to know that there is a spark of attraction between us and a partner, most especially if there is the possibility of the relationship leading to marriage. However, it is clear that sexual touch before marriage alters relationships. Sexual intimacy while we are getting to know each other, or as a method of getting to know each other, increases the difficulty of objectively assessing a partner's character. It shifts the focus onto physical attraction and bonding emotionally through physical touch, rather than exploring and developing the other far more important dimensions of our friendship-based relationship. If a partner won't or does not take time early in a relationship to know more about what we think about, what we find important in life, and what makes us happy and sad, they may never do so. We won't be able to feel confident in them being there for us in the many ways we want and need.

Sex is primarily a physical act of intimate touch, but it has mental, emotional, and spiritual components. Some people define sex from a physical standpoint as occurring only when there is sexual intercourse. However, it is actually broader than that, because it includes any intentional contact that arouses a sexual response, whether we are by ourselves or with a partner. Therefore, sex also includes actions such as:

- Talking explicitly about sex
- Listening to sexually explicit musical lyrics
- Viewing sexual images (pornography or some television shows and movies)
- Reading books that arouse the desire to have sex
- Fantasizing and masturbating
- Manual sex as a couple or with others
- Oral sex

If we choose not to engage in sex with others, it includes avoiding all of these above actions and more. This may be difficult for us when our peers have few boundaries or standards. It can be a challenge to consistently live up to the Bahá'í standards. However, we are asked to do our best each day with God's help to heal society and set an example for others. Having friends and youth leaders who value these standards helps give us a support group too.

How Is Sex Partially Spiritual When It's Within Marriage?

Much of the world holds the view that sex is strictly an act of physical pleasure. The view that it can have a spiritual component when it occurs within marriage may be a new idea to you. There is balance to strike between the extreme focus on sex in our society today and the spiritually out-of-date model that says sex even in marriage is bad or wrong. The reality is that sexual intimacy is usually one of the key ingredients in a good marriage. Marriage has both physical and spiritual aspects, and they are often intertwined. Sex within marriage can have these related spiritual connections:

- It builds unity between spouses
- All the spiritual qualities of character apply to it: faithfulness, patience, flexibility, enthusiasm, cooperation, respect, justice, honesty, moderation, patience, perseverance, purity....
- It has been given by God as part of marriage and as a purpose of marriage
- It leads to children: new souls brought into the world
- “When we unite love with sex in its proper place, which is marriage, we have an abiding fountain of happiness and strength from which to draw. Sex can strengthen love, love can sublimate sex into a spiritual communion, a joy for the soul as well as the body.” (Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *Prescription for Living* (rev. ed.), p. 87)

Quotations for Guidance

1. “O ye peoples of the world! Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures. ... Were any man to taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments, shining above the Dayspring of His bountiful care and loving-kindness. ... Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. #3, #4)
2. “Should a man wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no harm can befall him, if he alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God, for God hath ordained every good thing, whether created in the heavens or in the earth, for such of His servants as truly believe in Him.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 276, #CXXVIII)
3. “A chaste and holy life must be made the controlling principle in the behavior and conduct of all Bahá'ís, both in their social relations with the members of their own community, and in their contact with the world at large. ... It must be upheld, in all its integrity and implications, in every phase of the life of those who fill the ranks of that Faith, whether in their homes, their travels, their clubs, their societies, their entertainments, their schools, and their universities. ... It must be closely and continually identified with the mission of the Bahá'í Youth, both as an element in the life of the Bahá'í community, and as a factor in the future progress and orientation of the youth of their own country.

“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. It demands daily vigilance in the control of one's carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its

excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. It requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs. It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature, the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices. It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 25)

4. “[T]he Bahá’í conception of sex is based on the belief that chastity should be strictly practiced by both sexes, not only because it is in itself highly commendable ethically, but also due to its being the only way to a happy and successful marital life. Sex relationships of any form, outside marriage, are not permissible therefore....” (Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, #1157)
5. “The Bahá’í Faith recognizes the value of the sex impulse, but condemns its illegitimate and improper expressions such as free love, companionate marriage and others, all of which it considers positively harmful to man and to the society in which he lives. 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. The Bahá’ís do not believe in the suppression of the sex impulse but in its regulation and control.” (Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, #1156)
6. “[T]he whole matter of sex and the problems related to it have assumed far too great an importance in the thinking of present-day society.” (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, #1220)
7. “If Bahá’í youth combine such personal purity with an attitude of uncensorious forbearance towards others they will find that those who may have criticized or even mocked them will come, in time, to respect them. They will, moreover, be laying a firm foundation for future married happiness.” (Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly, *Lights of Guidance*, #1213)
8. “...[T]he Cause of God will derive immense benefit when it is observed that the Bahá’ís, and particularly Bahá’í youth, stand out against the laxity and depravity of the permissive society, that the exalted standards of conduct which they strive to uphold are firmly rooted in spiritual principles, giving them confidence, self-respect and true happiness. On the other hand only the greatest harm can be done to the Cause if its followers are simply engulfed by the current tide.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #1206)
9. “Worldly desire is not the essence of a human being, but a veil that obscures it. Adherence to the Teachings of the Divine Educator refines the character and develops the potentialities with which each person is endowed; it liberates the individual and society from lower inclinations that give rise to the ills that afflict humanity.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to an individual believer, May 9, 2014)
10. “Abandonment of ‘a frivolous conduct’ does not imply that a Bahá’í must be sour-faced or perpetually solemn. Humor, happiness, joy are characteristics of a true Bahá’í life. Frivolity palls and eventually leads to boredom and emptiness, but true happiness and joy and humor that are parts of a balanced life that includes serious thought, compassion and humble servitude to God, are characteristics that enrich life and add to its radiance.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I, “A Chaste and Holy Life”*, p. 54)

Activity: A Spiritual Assembly has asked you to plan and facilitate a session with a junior youth group in your community to help them understand how to practice chastity with their classmates, friends, and in relationships. Using the above quotations, complete the form that follows at the end of this section.

Quotations for Reference About Specific Situations

1. "...[I]n every aspect of life, purity and holiness, cleanliness and refinement, exalt the human condition and further the development of man's inner reality. Even in the physical realm, cleanliness will conduce to spirituality, as the Holy Writings clearly state. And although bodily cleanliness is a physical thing, it hath, nevertheless, a powerful influence on the life of the spirit." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #129)
2. "We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion." (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 38; para. #51)
3. "In the teachings there is nothing against dancing, but the friends should remember that the standard of Bahá'u'lláh is modesty and chastity. The atmosphere of modern dance halls, where so much smoking and drinking and promiscuity goes on, is very bad, but decent dances are not harmful in themselves. There is certainly no harm in classical dancing or learning dancing in school. There is also no harm in taking part in dramas. Likewise in cinema acting. The harmful thing, nowadays, is not the art itself but the unfortunate corruption which often surrounds these arts. As Bahá'ís we need to avoid none of the arts, but acts and the atmosphere that sometimes go with these professions we should avoid." (Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, pp. 98-99)
4. "What Bahá'u'lláh means by chastity certainly does not include the kissing that goes on in modern society. It is detrimental to the morals of young people, and often leads them to go too far, or arouses appetites which they cannot perhaps at the time satisfy legitimately through marriage, and the suppression of which is a strain on them. The Bahá'í standard is very high, more particularly when compared with the thoroughly rotten morals of the present world. But this standard of ours will produce healthier, happier, nobler people, and induce stabler marriages." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #1210)
5. "Masturbation is clearly not a proper use of the sex instinct, as this is understood in the Faith. Moreover it involves, as you have pointed out, mental fantasies, while Bahá'u'lláh, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, has exhorted us not to indulge our passions and in one of His well-known Tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá encourages us to keep our 'secret thoughts pure'. Of course many wayward thoughts come involuntarily to the mind and these are merely a result of weakness and are not blameworthy unless they become fixed or even worse, are expressed in improper acts." (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, #1220)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the benefits of chastity?
2. What can assist you to keep your "secret thoughts pure"?
3. What types of activities seem to be chaste and holy? Which ones do the quotations seem to say are not?
4. What types of activities could be good to participate in and help you get to know someone, learn about the character of a partner, and at the same time maintain chastity?
5. How can you communicate your commitment to the standards of a chaste and pure life when someone asks you out on a date? What might be an appropriate time and method?
6. Is it ever appropriate to let your partner make the decision about how far to go; in other words, to let go of personal responsibility for your decision about whether or not to uphold chastity?
7. How could chastity before marriage contribute to happiness within marriage?
8. What positive activities will you become involved in, so your focus is on them and not on activities that lead to having sexual experiences outside of marriage?

Worksheet: Facilitating a Session on Chastity for Junior Youth (Ages 11-14)

Assignment: A Spiritual Assembly has asked you to plan and facilitate a session with a junior youth group in your community to help them understand how to practice chastity with their classmates, friends, and in relationships. The form below will guide you with part of the process, but feel free to be creative beyond this structure.

Quotations to Use: (Indicate the first few words, or just put stars next to the quotations in the handout)

Key Points to Share:

[illegible]

Methods and Activities for Group Learning:

[illegible]

What Else to Consider?:

7 - Making Excellent Choices

The friendships and relationships we choose will affect the quality of our lives and the people we know. As we strengthen our own characters and our ability to clearly discern the characters of others, we will make better and better choices.

As we build our knowledge about character and relationships, we strengthen our ability to make choices that are self-respecting and respectful of our friends and relationship partners. It takes both knowledge and courage to make and confidently live with the choice to do something difficult. Sometimes those choices will relate to chastity, but there are many others that also arise. These include telling the truth, whether to build unity with a partner's family members, how much time to spend together, whether to be of service to others, and more. The more we base our choices on spiritual principles, the more our hearts and minds will feel free and happy.

Kelly Monjazebe of Spirit First Seminars in British Columbia, Canada (www.spiritfirstseminars.com), offers the concept of creating a zone of safety around ourselves. She says, "Given that we are surrounded by a culture that is often degrading and undignified, it is helpful to consider that we all have a 'Nobility Zone', or a set of boundaries that keep us emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically safe. The laws of God give us clear directives to keep ourselves safe. We also need to use our power of discernment.

Kelly says, "Within the Zone, we are confident that our choices and behavior uphold our nobility or dignity and are in alignment with God's Will for us. We feel good about ourselves when we are acting within the Zone. Outside of the Zone is where we face moral dangers. If we choose to act outside of our Nobility Zone, we are likely to experience regret, remorse, and shame. If we find ourselves having made some poor choices, we can use the experience to learn and get ourselves back on track, or back in the Zone."

When you are conducting your relationships inside the boundaries of the Nobility Zone, these are the dominating qualities of the relationship:

- honesty
- friendship
- spiritual foundation
- equality and power balance
- both have an inner moral compass
- trust (clear boundaries)
- effective communication
- joy
- maturity
- dignity
- intimacy
- use of discernment
- commitment
- fun

Quotations for Guidance

1. "SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created." (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic #22)
2. "Set before thine eyes God's unerring Balance and, as one standing in His Presence, weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life. Bring thyself to account ere thou art summoned to a reckoning...." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 236)
3. "How often has it happened that an individual who was graced with every attribute of humanity and wore the jewel of true understanding, nevertheless followed after his passions until his excellent qualities passed beyond moderation and he was forced into excess. His pure intentions changed to evil ones, his

attributes were no longer put to uses worthy of them, and the power of his desires turned him aside from righteousness and its rewards into ways that were dangerous and dark. A good character is in the sight of God and His chosen ones and the possessors of insight, the most excellent and praiseworthy of all things, but always on condition that its center of emanation should be reason and knowledge and its base should be true moderation.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 59-60)

4. “The believers, particularly the young ones, should therefore fully realize the necessity of praying. For prayer is absolutely indispensable to their inner spiritual development, and this...is the very foundation and purpose of the religion of God.” (Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer; *Lights of Guidance*, #1845)
5. “The Bahá’í youth should, on the one hand, be taught the lesson of self-control which, when exercised, undoubtedly has a salutary effect on the development of character and of personality in general, and on the other should be advised, nay even encouraged, to contract marriage while still young and in full possession of their physical vigor. Economic factors, no doubt, are often a serious hindrance to early marriage, but in most cases are only an excuse, and as such should not be overstressed.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I*, “A Chaste and Holy Life”, p. 56)
6. “In contrast to many contemporary conceptions, the Bahá’í teachings maintain that a person must rise above certain material aspects of human nature to develop and manifest inherent spiritual qualities that characterize his or her true self. The Sacred Texts contain laws and exhortations that, in many instances, redirect or restrict behaviors that arise from impulses, tendencies, and desires, whether inborn or acquired. Some of these are physical, while others are emotional or psychological. Yet, whatever their origin, it is through their regulation and control that the higher, spiritual nature is able to predominate and flourish. Those who are not Bahá’ís may have no cause to take into account such considerations. A Bahá’í, however, cannot set aside the implications of these teachings and must endeavor to respond to the best of his or her ability, though it be little by little and day by day. In so doing, all believers face challenges, although the specific type or extent of a test may differ. They act with faith in Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration, ‘Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures’, and they respond to His call, ‘Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.’” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, April 22, 2013)
7. “[...]here is much [in Bahá’í literature] that concerns the nature of man, his inner life and growth, and the way to a true Bahá’í life. If you are sincerely intent on overcoming your problem, you must yourself determine to resist wayward impulses each time they arise and the House of Justice feels that there is no better way than to turn to the Writings to divert our thoughts into spiritual channels, perhaps to concentrate on what we may do to help others along the way to discovering the Bahá’í Faith. The more we occupy ourselves with teaching the Cause and serving our fellow-man in this way, the stronger we become in resisting that which is abhorrent to our spiritual selves. (*Lights of Guidance*, #1228)
 “Man’s physical existence on this earth is a period during which the moral exercise of his free will is tried and tested in order to prepare his soul for the other worlds of God, and we must welcome affliction and tribulations as opportunities for improvement in our eternal selves. [...]Every human being is beset by such inner promptings as pride, greed, selfishness, lustful heterosexual or homosexual desires, to name a few which must be overcome, and overcome them we must if we are to fulfil the purpose of our human existence. ... (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #1228)
 “Recognizing imperfections, which we all have, is a positive step towards spiritual growth. Every living thing must change; it is the very nature of life. This growth and change can be imperceptible and slow or dramatic and rapid. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, December 2, 1980)
 “It is said in a letter dated 6 October 1954 written by the beloved Guardian’s secretary on his behalf to an individual believer:

When a person becomes a Bahá'í, actually what takes place is that the seed of the spirit starts to grow in the human soul. This seed must be watered by the outpourings of the Holy Spirit. These gifts of the spirit are received through prayer, meditation, study of the Holy Utterances and service to the Cause of God.

“Another letter written on 22 October 1949 on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer states: We must be patient with others, infinitely patient!, but also with our own poor selves, remembering that even the Prophets of God sometimes got tired and cried out in despair! . . . He urges you to persevere and add up your accomplishments, rather than to dwell on the dark side of things. Everyone's life has both a dark and bright side. The Master said: turn your back to the darkness and your face to Me.”

(The Universal House of Justice, June 5, 1993 on Homosexuality; This and other sources on homosexuality may be found at www.bnasaa.org)

8. “Bahá'ís must make the utmost effort to uphold Bahá'í standards, no matter how difficult they may seem at first. Such efforts will be made easier if the youth will understand that the laws and standards of the Faith are meant to free them from untold spiritual and moral difficulties in the same way that a proper appreciation of the laws of nature enables one to live in harmony with the forces of the planet.”

(On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, pp. 362-363)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What assists you to live according to Bahá'í moral standards?
2. What are the benefits from making good choices and being obedient to the laws?
3. Who would be good to consult with about your choices?



8 - Resolving and Rebounding from Poor Choices

Even when we know the standards for how to behave individually and in relationships, we often struggle to meet them. Our goal is always to strive for excellence, but perfection isn't possible. Our failures help us with learning humility, trusting in the mercy and forgiveness of God, asking for help, making amends where appropriate, and learning new ways of speaking and acting. Our problems give us opportunities to strengthen our characters and make better choices the next time.

The more effective we are at discerning our errors, addressing the issues, cleaning up whatever problems we have caused, forgiving ourselves, and being resilient in picking up and going on, the better. The longer we stay stuck in whatever poor choice we made and its consequences, the deeper the hole we will dig. We become emotionally and mentally stuck in the past, and this influences future relationships or may even have us withdraw from having them. Making efforts to resolve the past and resiliently go forward will empower us to have better relationships in the future.

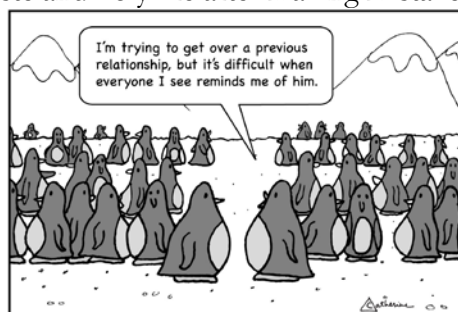
Quotations for Guidance

1. "Beautify your tongues, O people, with truthfulness, and adorn your souls with the ornament of honesty." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 297, #CXXXVI)
2. "The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 178)
3. "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)
4. "O God, my God! Have mercy then upon my helpless state, my poverty, my misery, my abasement! Give me to drink from the generous cup of Thy grace and forgiveness, stir me with the sweet scents of Thy love, gladden my bosom with the light of Thy knowledge, purify my soul with the mysteries of Thy oneness, raise me to life with the gentle breeze that cometh from the gardens of Thy mercy—till I sever myself from all else but Thee, and lay hold of the hem of Thy garment of grandeur, and consign to oblivion all that is not Thee, and be companioned by the sweet breathings that waft during these Thy days, and attain unto faithfulness at Thy Threshold of Holiness, and arise to serve Thy Cause, and to be humble before Thy loved ones, and, in the presence of Thy favored ones, to be nothingness itself. Verily art Thou the Helper, the Sustainer, the Exalted, the Most Generous." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #2)
5. "The only people who are truly free of the 'dross of self' are the Prophets, for to be free of one's ego is a hall-mark of perfection. We humans are *never* going to become perfect, for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter. However, we must constantly mount higher, seek to be more perfect." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #389)
6. "...[T]he Cause *has* the spiritual power to re-create us if we make the effort to let that power influence us, and the greatest help in this respect is prayer. We must supplicate Bahá'u'lláh to assist us to overcome the failings in our own characters, and also exert our own will power in mastering ourselves." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #394)

7. "He is very happy to see that you have put into practice one of the most encouraging precepts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which He said that we should try and make every stumbling-block a stepping-stone to progress. In the course of your past life you have all stumbled very gravely; but, far from being embittered or defeated by this experience, you are determined to make it a means of purifying your natures, improving your characters, and enabling you to become better citizens in the future. This is truly pleasing in the eyes of God." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Baha'is of Kitalya Farm Prison, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, p. 26, #1337)
8. "Bahá'u'lláh prohibits confession to, and seeking absolution of one's sins from, a human being. Instead one should beg forgiveness from God. ... Shoghi Effendi sets the prohibition into context. His secretary has written on his behalf that we '...are forbidden to confess to any person, as do the Catholics to their priests, our sins and shortcomings, or to do so in public, as some religious sects do. However, if 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.' The Universal House of Justice has also clarified that Bahá'u'lláh's prohibition concerning the confession of sins does not prevent an individual from admitting transgressions in the course of consultations held under the aegis of Bahá'í institutions. Likewise, it does not preclude the possibility of seeking advice from a close friend or of a professional counselor regarding such matters." (Note #58 appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)
9. "When a believer has a problem concerning which he must make a decision, he has several courses open to him. If it is a matter that affects the interests of the Faith he should consult with the appropriate Assembly or committee, but individuals have many problems which are purely personal and there is no obligation upon them to take such problems to the institutions of the Faith; indeed, when the needs of the teaching work are of such urgency it is better if the friends will not burden their Assemblies with personal problems that they can solve by themselves. A Bahá'í who has a problem may wish to make his own decision upon it after prayer and after weighing all the aspects of it in his own mind; he may prefer to seek the counsel of individual friends or of professional counselors such as his doctor or lawyer so that he can consider such advice when making his decision; or in a case where several people are involved, such as a family situation, he may want to gather together those who are affected so that they may arrive at a collective decision. There is also no objection whatever to a Bahá'í asking a group of people to consult together on a problem facing him. It should be borne in mind that all consultation is aimed at arriving at a solution to a problem and is quite different from the sort of group baring of the soul that is popular in some circles these days which borders on the kind of confession that is forbidden in the Faith." (Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, *Lights of Guidance*, #589)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What steps can you take to resolve relationship issues that are troubling you?
2. What is the role of forgiveness? Is there still an effect on you from your choices?
3. How can you use the learning from the situation to be empowered to go forward and keep trying?
4. What character qualities strengthened through this difficulty?
5. Can you go back to living a chaste and holy life after making mistakes? What helps you to do this?



9 - Living a Happy, Vibrant Life

We are connected to others, and the more unified and connected we are, the happier we tend to be. The more our words and actions demonstrate self-respect and respect for others, the happier we are. The more we find purpose and value in the world around us, the more we refine our characters, the more pure our thoughts are, the more happiness is possible. What's more, the greater our joy, sense of purpose, and refinement of our characters, the more easily we form meaningful and lasting relationships with others. We more easily discern whether someone is an excellent partner for us.

A happy, vibrant life includes a high quality in our social life with friends, in our neighborhoods, and in our communities. We appreciate spending time together, laughing, and getting to know one another. Others enjoy spending time with us.

Quotations for Guidance

1. "With the utmost friendliness and in a spirit of perfect fellowship take ye counsel together, and dedicate the precious days of your lives to the betterment of the world and the promotion of the Cause of Him Who is the Ancient and Sovereign Lord of all." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 184, #XCII)
2. "...[M]an's supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind." ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 19)
3. "Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness. But when sadness visits us we become weak, our strength leaves us, our comprehension is dim and our intelligence veiled. The actualities of life seem to elude our grasp, the eyes of our spirits fail to discover the sacred mysteries, and we become even as dead beings.
There is no human being untouched by these two influences; but all the sorrow and the grief that exist come from the world of matter—the spiritual world bestows only the joy!"
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Paris Talks*, pp. 109-110)
4. "...[T]he maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not." (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván 2010*, para. 22)

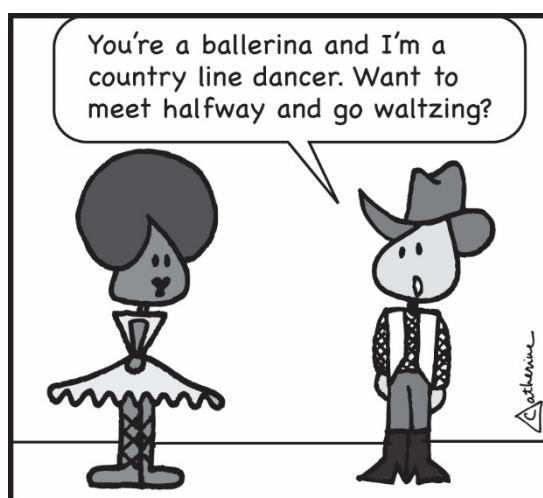
From Other Sources:

1. "Both at lunch and supper He [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] used to entertain a number of pilgrims and friends, and charm His guests with happy and humorous stories as well as precious talks on a great variety of subjects. ‘My home is the home of laughter and mirth,’ he declared, and indeed it was so. He delighted in gathering together people of various races, colors, nations and religions in unity and cordial friendship around his hospitable board. He was indeed a loving father not only to the little community at Haifa, but to the Bahá’í community throughout the world." (H. M. Balyuzi quoting Dr. Esslemont, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá—The Centre of the Covenant*, p. 442)
2. "Like a good roll of duct tape, humor bonds us to each other. It strengthens us as a community, and it allows us to transcend our differences and our barriers. When we laugh with someone—whether it is a stranger, a friend, a lover, or an enemy—our worlds overlap for a tiny, but significant moment. It is then that defenses are lowered, ideas and feelings are shared, and the best in each other gleams forth. ... Only

when we can get past ourselves, when we can laugh past our perceived superiority and righteousness, can we truly look at our neighbor with a sense of hospitality and justice. ... We all laugh in the same language.... When we laugh together, we not only cross barriers, but we also bond together as community.” (Rev. Susan Sparks, *Laugh Your Way to Grace, Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor*, p. 68)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What activities are occurring in your life when it is filled with spiritual and social vitality? What is the outcome where this exists at the community level?
2. Stories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often include descriptions of His love, humor, laughter, and vitality. He was comfortable socializing with a wide variety of people. What does your social life look like? What do you want to improve? How will you do that?
3. What role do humor and laughter play in your life?
4. How important is it to you having a compatible sense of humor with a partner?



10 - Being of Valuable Service

Making choices that are self-respecting and align with our purposes in life gives meaning and value to our lives. A key focus for Bahá'ís is taking actions that improve the lives of others, both individually and through systemic social change. These action choices are valuable whether we are in a relationship or not. Before we enter a serious relationship, we are wise to make sure each of our lives are in positive order through prayer, assessing and improving our words and actions, orienting outward to make a difference, and refining our characters.

When we are in a relationship, engaging in service with a partner is often an excellent way to get to know one another, learn of each other's character, and determine our ability to work together and be together in harmony. Thoughtful and selfless service to one another, to one's family, and to others is intimately connected to having a happy and successful marriage.

As we serve and are purposeful individually and with others, we have the opportunity to intentionally practice and strengthen our character qualities. Our interactions with others often provide opportunities for growth.

Quotations for Guidance

1. "It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action. ... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. ... Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 250)
2. "...[A]ll effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer." ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Paris Talks*, pp. 176-177)
3. "The more we search for ourselves, the less likely we are to find ourselves; and the more we search for God, and to serve our fellow-men, the more profoundly will we become acquainted with ourselves, and the more inwardly assured. This is one of the great spiritual laws of life." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, #391)
4. "...Bahá'í youth can accept—and should be encouraged to accept—a responsibility of their own for moral leadership in the transformation of society." (Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point*, p. 165)
5. "Your peers long to make sense of the events they see unfolding around them, both at home and on the global scene. You alone have the Message that can soothe their troubled hearts and provide them with the clarity of thought they desire." (Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point*, p. 182)
6. "...[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)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you consider as the purposes of your life? How are you working to fulfill those purposes? What would you like to start doing to work toward them? Continue doing? Stop doing?
2. What service to others is important to you? How can you make the lives of others and the world better?
3. What types of motives are important in service?
4. What actions could you take within a relationship that would be service to a partner? What could you do as partners to serve others?
5. What services do you wish to do with a relationship partner?



11 - Connecting Relationships with Marriage

We all have many relationships throughout our lives. At some point, it is likely that a special relationship will develop with someone we realize may be an excellent marriage partner. All the friendships we develop as we are growing up build our skills for a friendship-based marriage. The character strengths/virtues we develop throughout our childhoods and youth are the foundation for our marriages, because they help us learn how to create and enjoy harmony and unity together.

As we make choices with the words we use with others, and our actions, we gain knowledge and experience with relationships. The more we keep the Bahá'í teachings as the foundation for making those choices, the more likely we are to have happiness, quality, and stability in a relationship, and then in a marriage partnership.

Strong and happy marriages are the foundational building block of unity. They are the foundation of families, which are the foundation of communities, which are the foundation of cities, which are the foundation of countries, and ultimately the foundation for unity on the planet. Marriage partners help one another to grow spiritually, serve God and humanity together, and are companions for eternity.

Our actions leading up to marriage help us to create these strong marriages. When we don't carefully prepare, and ensure we are compatible with our partner, we can experience separation and divorce. This causes disunity, pain, and hardship for everyone concerned. It is important to do some training and preparation for marriage throughout dating, courtship, and engagement. This could include attending workshops, working with a helpful married couple who mentors us, going through books, consulting with parents, meeting with a Spiritual Assembly, and more.

After the couple has made an independent choice to marry, Bahá'ís are then required to have their parents' consent to marry. In part, consent is required because the unity of the extended families will help to keep the marriage strong and unified. When Bahá'ís have consent and are ready to marry, they consult with their Spiritual Assembly about the requirements for the marriage ceremony.

Quotations for Guidance

1. "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.... [H]old fast to it as an assistance to yourselves." (Bahá'u'lláh: *Bahá'í Prayers* (US 2002), p. 118)
2. "...[M]arriage is dependent upon the consent of both parties. Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned it, once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancor should arise amongst them." (Bahá'u'lláh: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 42)
3. "...[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*, #84)
4. "Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquility, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. Such a family but addeth to its stature and its lasting honor, as day succeedeth day. And if

we widen out the sphere of unity a little to include the inhabitants of a village who seek to be loving and united, who associate with and are kind to one another, what great advances they will be seen to make, how secure and protected they will be. Then let us widen out the sphere a little more, let us take the inhabitants of a city, all of them together: if they establish the strongest bonds of unity among themselves, how far they will progress, even in a brief period and what power they will exert. And if the sphere of unity be still further widened out, that is, if the inhabitants of a whole country develop peaceable hearts, and if with all their hearts and souls they yearn to cooperate with one another and to live in unity, and if they become kind and loving to one another, that country will achieve undying joy and lasting glory. Peace will it have, and plenty, and vast wealth.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #221)

5. “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)
6. “...[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 Boards of Counsellors, December 29, 2015)
7. “Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá’í marriage.” (Bahá’í World Centre Research Department memorandum for *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages* compilation, item 3)
8. “...[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)
9. “...[T]he House of Justice feels it most essential for your husband and you to understand that marriage can be a source of well-being, conveying a sense of security and spiritual happiness. However, it is not something that just happens. For marriage to become a haven of contentment it requires the cooperation of the marriage partners themselves, and the assistance of their families....” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, “Women”, p. 384)
10. “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.” (Note #134 appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)

Reflection and Discussion:

1. What is your level of confidence about being successful at marriage (low, medium, or high)? How can you increase your confidence?

2. In what ways do you think marriage is a “fortress for well-being and salvation”? What does “well-being” look like to you? What do you think “salvation” could mean in this context?
3. What are some of the purposes of marriage? Benefits?
4. What does it mean that marriage is a divine institution?
5. What is the connection between marriage and world unity?
6. What ways do you think will work best for you in preparing for marriage?

12 - Making Relationship & Marriage Preparation Goals

Instructions:

In the table below, enter at least three goals (from any area) that you will work on to fulfill your commitment to prepare effectively for a friendship-based, unified, happy, and healthy marriage.

Goals	Specific Action Steps	Complete By:
Self-Preparation	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.
Building Knowledge About Marriage	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.
Friendship	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.
Dating	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.
Courting	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.

Notes

[illegible]

13 - Sources for Further Study and Action

From Marriage Transformation (www.marriagetransformation.com/store.htm):

- *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* (self/couple prep for Bahá'ís and partners)
- *Creating Excellent Relationships: The Power of Character Choices*
- *All-in-One Marriage Prep: 75 Experts Share Tips and Wisdom to Help You Get Ready Now*
- *Pure Gold: Encouraging Character Qualities in Marriage*

From Other Sources:

- *Conscious Courtship*, by Raymond Switzer
- *Mindful Marriage*, by Raymond and Furugh Switzer

Marriage Transformation Websites:

www.marriagetransformation.com

www.bahaimarriage.net

www.bahairelationships.com

From Others:

www.dibbleinstitute.org

www.virtuesproject.com

www.smartmarriages.com

www.healthymarriageinfo.org

www.prepare-enrich.com