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Recommendations for Promoting Healthy Marriages & Preventing Divorce in the American Muslim Community





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Executive Summary

As divorce becomes more prevalent among American Muslims, it is increasingly important for families to understand how to minimize the risk of divorce and build healthy marriages. Although there are various approaches to help couples achieve healthy relationships, little is known about how American Muslims perceive and utilize marriage education programs and counseling interventions, as well as how they navigate marital disputes, and utilize professional and religious-based services to prevent divorce.¹ This study was commissioned with the following objectives: 1) to explore the experiences of American Muslims with various marriage education programs and counseling interventions, 2) to understand perceptions about the effectiveness and relevance of such activities in the American Muslim community 3) and to develop recommendations to promote healthy marriages and prevent divorce in the American Muslim community. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with Muslims in Southeast Michigan, along with an extensive literature review and consultation with a team of experts. This report provides an overview of the literature; describes the study findings; and provides recommendations for community members, imams and mosque leadership and counseling professionals. The report aims to inform existing efforts to help American Muslim couples prepare for and maintain healthy marriages and enable imams, community leaders and counseling professionals to design effective and relevant healthy marriage and divorce prevention programming.

Background



"I didn't know that marriage is something you should read about or study. When I had my baby, I read so many books before and after she was born. I felt this is the most important thing I'm doing, and I wanted to learn everything. But marriage, it never occurred to me that that's something you have to work at."

- Divorced Woman



In the United States, it is estimated that approximately half of all first marriages will end in divorce.² Each year, there are about 850,000 divorces, impacting over one million American children.³ Divorce is becoming a bitter reality for American Muslims as well. Many American Muslim mental health professionals and religious leaders have expressed concern about the increase in marital discord and divorce in the American Muslim community. Although there is anecdotal evidence that the divorce rate among American Muslims is increasing, it is difficult to quantify how many marriages end in divorce due to limited research. Two divorce rates commonly cited for American Muslims include 32.33% and 21.3%, respectively. The first is based on Ilyas Ba-Yunus' 2000 review⁴ of divorce records from five U.S. states and one Canadian province, and the second on Alshugairi's research⁵ in 2010 based on a sample of 751 Muslims in California.

Although divorce has been accepted as part of the normative culture in the U.S. for the past few decades, it remains taboo in many communities, particularly those in Muslim majority countries. Despite this taboo, due to industrialization, globalization and shifts in family values, divorce rates are increasing significantly

in Muslim communities globally. For instance, the divorce rate in Saudi Arabia is said to have increased by 35% in 2011, which is significantly higher than the world average of 18-22%.⁶ In 2010 in Saudi Arabia, the divorce rate was approximately 21% (18,765 divorces occurred out of 90,983 marriages), an average of one divorce per hour. Other studies reveal that the divorce rate has reached approximately 37% in the UAE, 47% in Bahrain, and 29% in Kuwait.⁷

Reasons for Divorce

There are multiple reasons for divorce, but according to the National Fatherhood Initiative's 2005 survey, the eight most common reasons for divorce in the U.S. are lack of commitment (73%), too much arguing (56%), infidelity (55%), marrying too young (46%), unrealistic expectations (45%), lack of equality in the relationship (44%), lack of premarital preparation (41%), and domestic violence (29%).⁸ Among American Muslim couples, the primary reasons reported include lack of parental involvement in children's lives, disagreements between spouses, lack of relationship knowledge, communication skills, marrying at a young age, and short-term engagements.⁹⁻¹¹

Changing gender-role dynamics and mismatched expectations are the most frequently reported contributors to marital conflict, along with the relationship between the married couple, extended family and in-laws.¹ Research by Chapman and Cattaneo demonstrated that out of 296 young, well-educated American Muslim couples, 68.2% had significantly negative interactions, and 56.1% reported at least one moderate to major issue in their relationship.¹² For those with low marital satisfaction, their top five major problems included: 1) different interests, 2) not spending time together, 3) in-laws, 4) religious differences, and 5) attitudes toward sex. American Muslim couples and families may face additional challenges such as acculturation, difficult socio-political realities, economic hardships and lack of social support, each of which can highly impact marital and family relationships.

Although marriage is a cherished bond, it is important to keep in mind that divorce is permitted in Islam, and under some circumstances divorce is inevitable, necessary, and undoubtedly a healthier option than staying married. For example, in marriages involving domestic violence, it may be healthier for the abused partner and the children to leave rather than to remain in a volatile home environment. Overall, couples are encouraged to be proactive in establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship and to explore all possible remedies before pursuing divorce.

Marital Satisfaction

Few studies have been conducted on the marital quality and satisfaction of American Muslims, or an overall appraisal of contentment with their marriage.¹³ However, current research indicates that despite the suspected increase in divorce among American Muslims, they tend to report moderate to high levels of marital satisfaction.^{5, 12, 14-16} This may be due to the stigma attached to discussing marital conflict within the Muslim community. Women in most of these studies reported significantly lower levels of marital satisfaction compared to men.^{5, 14} This lower level of satisfaction for women can often be attributed to women's relatively lower influence or "say" in the marriage,¹⁷ and is consistent with research conducted on many other cultures regardless of age, generation and length of marriage.¹⁸⁻²⁰

Impact of Divorce



Marital dysfunction and divorce negatively impact families, increasing psychological distress and jeopardizing overall emotional well-being. Firstly, marital disruption is often an acrimonious process marked by high levels of inter-personal conflict leading to distress and a decline in positive emotions. Secondly, marital disruption also tends to reduce the financial well-being of former spouses,²¹ and the financial hardship that follows can have negative effects on emotional well-being.²² And finally, marriage is a central source of social support, and divorce can potentially destroy or weaken support networks, increasing emotional distress and decreasing the ability to cope with stress.

Impact on Children

Research conducted during the last decade continues to show that children with divorced parents score lower on average on a variety of emotional, behavioral, social, health and academic outcomes²³ than children with married parents. The adverse effects of divorce are not limited to childhood, adults with divorced parents tend to obtain less education, have lower levels of psychological well-being, report more problems in their own marriages and are at higher risk of encountering divorce in their own marriage.²⁴

Impact on Women

Often, women suffer more than men after divorce and experience greater declines in standard of living.

Women are more likely than men to maintain custody of their children, which may lead to greater economic burden and responsibility.²⁵ Although the decrease in emotional well-being after divorce is similar for both men and women, the transition to divorce is associated with more negative effects, financial burdens, time constraints and family responsibilities for women than men.²⁵

Benefits of Healthy Marriages

It is becoming increasingly recognized that healthy marriages are critical to society given the associated physical, emotional, and financial benefits for families. A survey of 14,000 adults over a 10-year-period demonstrated that marital status was one of the most important predictors of an individual's happiness, with 40 percent of married individuals reporting that they were very happy with their life in general, compared with less than 25 percent of those who were single or cohabiting.²⁶ A research study investigating marital happiness in 17 countries revealed that married men and women report significantly higher levels of personal fulfillment and happiness than unmarried individuals.²⁷ Married individuals reported the highest levels of well-being, regardless of whether they were happily married or not, while separated and divorced individuals reported to be the least content group.²⁶ Thus, being married seems to be associated with higher self-esteem, higher life satisfaction, higher level of contentment and less distress.²⁸

From a health perspective, married individuals have better physical and mental health than those who are not married.²⁹ Additionally, the health of children of married individuals is better than that of children who grow up in single-parent families.³⁰ Also, married parents and their children have longer life expectancies than single or divorced parents and their children.³¹ Financially too there are benefits for married individuals. In their research, Wilmoth and Koso found that on average, the household wealth of unmarried adults was 63% lower than married adults.³² Thus, overall, healthy marital relationships provide multiple benefits to individuals, families, and society as a whole.

Prevention and Intervention Approaches

Several approaches have been developed to help couples minimize the risk of divorce and achieve satisfying, long-lasting, healthy relationships. These approaches fall into two types of activities: marriage education programs and counseling interventions. A variety of these activities have been implemented in many ethnic and faith communities and can include marriage education workshops (offering information to couples about healthy relationships), premarital counseling (assessing compatibility and identifying potential pitfalls or trouble spots), marriage mentorship (offering assistance to couples when they need marital advice), marriage enrichment programs (helping to strengthen relationships) and marriage counseling (getting help for marital conflict). Several of these activities are discussed below and in the accompanying table (Table 1).

Table 1. Marriage Education and Counseling Intervention Models

Model	Target Audience	Function	Gains	Delivery	Time Needed	Type	Facilitator
PREPARE	Considering Marriage	Educational & Preventive	Strengths Areas, Growth Areas, Relationship Skills	Questionnaire, Feedback Sessions	4 to 8 sessions	Professional Faith Based	Counseling Professionals, Religious Leaders, Marriage Educators
SYMBIS	Pre-engaged/ Engaged/ Newly Married	Preparation	Couple Dynamics	Lectures, Exercises	8 to 10 sessions	Professional	Counseling Professionals, Religious Leaders
PAIRS	Pre-engaged/ Engaged/ Married	Educational	Self-Exploration, Relationship Skills	Lectures, Exercises	Sessions for 4 to 5 months	Group	Counseling Professionals
Couple Communication	Pre-engaged/ Engaged/ Married	Educational	Relationship Skills	Lectures, Exercises	4 to 6 sessions	Professional Group	Counseling Professionals, Religious Leaders, Educators
PREP	Engaged/ Married	Preventive	Protective Factors, Risk Factors, Relationship Skills	Lectures, Exercises	6 sessions	Group	Counseling Professionals, Religious Leaders, Educators
Relationship Enhancement	Engaged/ Families/ Groups	Therapy, Enrichment & Preventive	Insights, Relationship Skills	Lectures, Exercises	Varies	Professional	Counseling Professionals, Trained Individuals
Marriage Encounter	Married	Enrichment & Preventive	Couple Dynamics, Self-Exploration, Relationship Skills	Lectures, Exercises	Sessions over a weekend	Group Faith Based	Religious Leaders
ENRICH	Married	Enrichment & Counseling	Strengths Areas, Growth Areas, Relationship Skills	Questionnaire, Feedback Sessions	3 to 6 sessions	Professional Faith Based	Counseling Professionals, Religious Leaders, Trained Individuals
TIME	Married	Enrichment & Educational	Relationship Skills	Lectures, Exercises	10 sessions	Group	Counseling Professionals, Educators
Better Marriages (formerly known as Marriage Enrichment A.C.M.E. style)	Married	Enrichment	Strengths Areas, Growth Areas, Couple Dynamics	Lectures, Exercises	Varies	Group	Trained Individuals

Marriage Education Programs

Marriage education programs focus on preventing relationship problems and teaching couples communication and conflict resolution skills. These programs prepare couples for marriage and enhance existing marriages. Typically conducted in a structured group format, these programs may include test curriculums and trained facilitators. They may include faith-based workshops such as Al-Maghrif Institute's Love Notes seminar or research-based workshops such as PREP or PREPARE/ENRICH. Many marriage education programs are associated with greater levels of marital satisfaction and lower rates of conflict

and divorce.³³ Premarital education (education before marriage) has been “associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction, lower levels of destructive conflicts and higher levels of interpersonal commitment to spouses,” and a 31% lower chance of divorce.³³ PREP in particular has the most robust evidence of lowering divorce rates long term. An early study randomizing 135 couples from the community to PREP versus generic marriage education prospectively followed couples for five years, and found that in addition to reporting more positive interaction and greater marital satisfaction, only 8% of the couples that completed PREP divorced versus 16% who completed the placebo.³⁴ More recently in another study, of 248 U.S. army couples randomized to PREP versus the no treatment control group, 2.03% of individuals in the group who completed PREP versus 6.20% of individuals in the control group divorced after one year.³³

Another approach to marriage education utilizes marriage educators to mentor couples and coach them in communication and conflict resolution skills. Training marriage educators in the community can help alleviate the stress on religious leaders and counselors.

Counseling Interventions

Counseling interventions focus on treating relationship problems in a private and safe setting. Before marriage, premarital counseling can help couples identify and address relationship issues early on while also assessing their readiness for marriage. During marriage, counseling can help couples address complex relationship issues causing marital conflict. Through counseling, couples learn to understand themselves and each other better, and they also learn emotional regulation, healthy communication skills and ways to mediate conflict. Trained counselors are often psychologists, therapists and social workers. Religious leaders, such as imams can also provide counseling. However, they tend to have limited professional training in counseling and mental health and may be more focused on spiritual issues.

Premarital Counseling

Premarital counseling helps couples discuss expectations, identify potential problems and differences that may arise in the relationship, and eventually make a decision about whether they will marry. Many states provide incentives for completing premarital counseling (e.g. Minnesota, Florida), while some states require it (e.g. Indiana and Mississippi). Premarital counseling has been associated with a lower divorce rate,³³ as addressing issues earlier can help increase the odds of having a successful marriage. Nine out of ten couples that participated in premarital counseling considered it worthwhile and were less likely to consider divorce within the first five years of marriage.³³ Formal premarital education and/or counseling also were found to reduce the risk of eventual divorce, especially for those with higher risk for divorce.³⁵

Marriage Counseling

Marriage counseling can offer a safe environment to address marital conflict. Couples can learn relationship skills such as communicating honestly, listening intently and working through conflict. A counselor can help teach these skills while monitoring progress, mediating conflict and providing objective feedback. Marriage counseling can also include working through past issues that each partner may bring to the marriage and can help in nurturing connection and building trust. If couples are considering divorce, counseling can help them come to a decision and teach the skills needed for future relationships.³⁶

Faith-Based/Spiritual Counseling

With over 300,000 churches, temples, and mosques across the country,³⁷ many Americans seek both spiritual and mental health counseling from religious authorities. Religious leaders are approached for assistance with mental health related issues for many reasons. First, individuals and their families often enjoy long-term relationships with their religious leaders, and as a result, these leaders may observe changes in behavior and demeanor and recognize early signs of emotional distress.³⁸ Second, religious leaders are generally more accessible and more affordable than counselors or even some formal premarital educational programs. Imams and Muslim chaplains, in particular, do not charge fees for counseling. Additionally, many individuals who seek help from their place of worship report that the emotional support and encouragement offered was effective. Finally, religious leaders often serve as first-line mental health care providers and facilitators to help communities gain access to a larger network of mental health services.



Many Americans report that religious leaders have significantly higher interpersonal skills, including warmth, caring, stability, professionalism and listening skills compared to psychologists and psychiatrists. Therefore, despite the slow but steady rise in the percentage of individuals who seek help from mental

health professionals, religious leaders remain an important source of counseling for millions of Americans. Some studies suggest that religious leaders dedicate an average of 15% of their time (based on a 50-hour work week) to pastoral counseling, a figure that translates into a total of 138 million hours of counseling services annually.³⁸

Similar to other faith communities, American Muslims often seek help from religious leaders when facing emotional distress or family conflict. Research indicates that American Muslims may be reluctant to seek professional help due to concerns about the therapist's cultural and religious backgrounds and

their multicultural competencies.³⁹⁻⁴⁰ They may believe that Western therapy is based on individualistic, pathology oriented and culturally insensitive approaches adding more complexity to their own concerns.⁴¹ There are limited studies on the rate of seeking mental health services through Muslim communities and imams, but a survey of 22 mosques in New York indicated that 96% of worshippers perceived imams to play the role of a counselor⁴² even though the majority of imams providing these services were not trained in clinical and counseling skills.

Marriage Education and Counseling Interventions in Faith Communities

While there are no empirical studies that exist that demonstrate the effectiveness of marriage education and counseling interventions in mosques, synagogues or temples, many churches have created policies that require couples to go through premarital interventions as a pre-requisite to the wedding ceremony.⁴³ Many churches are also supportive of premarital preparation and welcome empirically based programs with a spiritual component.⁴⁴

The Christian PREP, for example, is an integration of the scriptures and empirically based strategies based on the original PREP. It has been used with couples before and during marriage and is usually delivered by pastors or mental health practitioners. The delivery method varies, and the programs typically run for five to six sessions.⁴⁵ To help African American couples who tend to be more religious, a spiritual enhancement model was used to create the Prayer Focused PREP (PFP). PFP has proven to be useful for other religious groups as well.⁴⁴

A longitudinal study revealed that most clergy or lay leaders trained to deliver PREP incorporate some parts of the program into their premarital training for couples. Due to time constraints for both leaders and clients, instead of delivering the full 12-hour program, most clergy or lay leaders may only choose certain components or modules they deem most relevant and helpful to the couples they are working with. The most frequently used modules are ones that focus on increasing positive communication and reducing destructive conflict.⁴⁶

Despite many studies demonstrating the benefits of marriage education and counseling, many people continue to be resistant to these activities. There is little research about how American Muslims perceive and utilize marriage education programs and counseling interventions, as well as how they navigate marital problems, reconcile disputes and utilize professional and religious-based services to prevent divorce.¹ Additionally, there is no standard model of marriage programming developed specifically for American Muslim communities. As the Muslim community in the United States continues to grow, so does the need for divorce prevention and healthy marriage programming that is culturally and religiously sensitive, with evidence-based resources available in the American context.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Southeast Michigan, home to one of the longest standing and largest American Muslim communities in the United States, numbering approximately 200,000 people.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ In addition to conducting an extensive literature review and consulting with a team of expert advisors, 33 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with married individuals, divorced individuals and key stakeholders including imams and counselors. Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. Table 2 describes inclusion and exclusion criteria. Imams and counselors were identified by members of the research team with intimate knowledge of the Muslim community in Michigan. Married and divorced individuals were recruited through a variety of methods including announcements at mosques, through fliers and emails and through identification by key community stakeholders.

Interviews were conducted with a diverse group of men and women of different ethnicities, races and theological sects. Interviews were conducted with ten married individuals, ten divorced individuals, six imams, six counselors and one marriage educator. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were conducted face to face at a location convenient for participants. Three slightly modified interview guides were used for the three different groups of participants (divorced/married individuals, imams and counselors). Participants were assured of confidentiality of responses and provided with a gift card for their time. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

A detailed content analysis of the data was conducted. Based on the interview guide questions, a coding scheme was developed and used to code the transcripts. Summaries were then developed by code and for each group of participants. A global integration of themes was performed across the interviews. Emergent themes were noted and categorized and are highlighted in this report.

Table 2: Sampling of Participants

Group	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Married Individuals*	Muslim man or woman (not couples) between the age of 18-50, married for at least one year and may have children, lives in Michigan, has participated in at least one marriage education activity and/or counseling intervention.	Non-Muslim, younger than 18 and older than 50, married for less than a year, only has a marriage contract but has not cohabited, does not live in Michigan, has not participated in any marriage education activity and/or counseling intervention.
Divorced Individuals*	Muslim man or woman (not couples) between the age of 18-50, has been divorced once and may have children, lives in Michigan, has participated in at least one marriage education activity and/or counseling intervention.	Non-Muslim, younger than 18 and older than 50, married, does not live in Michigan, has not participated in any marriage education activity and/or counseling intervention.
Imams	Imam affiliated with local mosque and who officiates marriages in Michigan, has had more than five years of experience providing services.	Non-Muslim, does not officiate marriages, is not affiliated with a local Michigan mosque, has less than five years of experience.
Counselors	Muslim mental health professional providing marriage education and/or counseling services to Muslims in Michigan.	Non-Muslim, does not provide services to Muslim couples, is not located in Michigan.

*Sampling aimed for at least 1 man and 1 woman from each mosque community, in an attempt to sample across the three main ethnic groups (if possible). Sampling also aimed for diversity of experience with the various prevention and intervention approaches.

Study Findings

Getting Married



"I went a second time with my mom and my dad, my dad's like, so let's do this thing. And everyone else sat quietly and then we went ahead and did it (performed the marriage contract). I was somewhere between ambivalent and supportive of it, not against it, certainly. And I had no idea how she felt at the time. But her family was enthusiastic and it sort of happened."

- Divorced Man

Stages of the Marital Process

The Islamic marriage contract (nikah or kitab) differentiates unmarried and married couples. Under Islamic law, couples may consummate their marriage and begin cohabitating once the Islamic marriage contract has been completed. However, a number of Muslim cultural practices impact this process. In some cases,



the Islamic marriage contract is completed once the couple has decided to get married, but cohabitation occurs later after the wedding reception. In other cases, the Islamic marriage contract is completed simultaneously with the civil marriage and is followed immediately by the wedding reception.

In general, participants referred to the period between introductions and the signing of the Islamic marital

contract as the courtship or “getting to know you” phase. When the Islamic marriage contract ceremony, the civil marriage and the wedding reception were not simultaneous, the period between the Islamic marital contract and the wedding reception was understood to be an engagement period.

Consistent with the diversity in Muslim cultural practices, participants described the stages of their marital process in a variety of ways. For over half of the participants, their marriage involved three separate events: an Islamic marriage contract ceremony, a civil marriage and a wedding reception. For the other half, their marriage involved a combination of these events. Depending on accepted community practices, cultural background, age and financial situation of the couple, participants completed all three events simultaneously or spaced them out over a period of time.

Introduction to Spouse

Participants met their spouses in a variety of ways. Half of the participants met their spouse through a mutual friend, parent, family member or an imam. The other half met their spouse through school, volunteer activities or work. The majority of participants lived in the same community as their spouse prior to marriage. Roughly a third had a “distant courtship” where they lived in a different community or state from their spouse. Only one marriage was described as being transnational.

Courtship Process



“I almost felt like we knew after a week of talking that we wanted to get married, which was probably the biggest part of the mistake. We just thought, we get along. We like each other. We’re attracted to each other. Why wouldn’t we get married? We don’t date, so we’ll just get married...You can’t really know somebody in two weeks. You can get along, probably, with anybody in two weeks.”

- Divorced Woman



“There was a long process with lots of conversations in the months that followed (the nikah) where I was trying to actively see if this is something that I should stop or continue. There was very little guidance externally, in terms of what should be discussed and what the criteria should be. I was very inexperienced when it came to that process, so I didn’t have any sense. And so the process itself was not effective.”

- Divorced Man

The majority of participants described their courtship period as being short. The time in length ranged from three months to a couple of years. Many participants felt they lacked guidance from their parents, guardians (wali) and families on how to use this time more purposefully and constructively. A few of the female participants experienced pressure from parents to move forward with an Islamic marriage contract due to concerns that the couple may engage in a premarital sexual relationship. Parents often shared cautionary tales of other young women who consummated the relationship prior to an Islamic marriage contract and were left with limited protections or rights.

While some participants utilized premarital questionnaires during the courtship process, they found that the question/answer process was superficial or lacked utility. Others noted that their Islamic marriage contract was performed haphazardly or with limited prior planning. Overall, participants described feeling confused or frustrated with the courtship process.

Decision-making Process



“In hindsight, I would have looked at a little deeper. But I think I just wasn’t prepared. I wasn’t really looking, because I was trying to leave a problem behind. My family. My childhood. And you’re going into another situation, and you don’t have the eyes wide open.”

- Divorced Woman



“When I look back, red flags that I overlooked or missed, which were very in my face, yet I totally overlooked them. I knew early on that in terms of my relationship with her, that those issues were there, yet I didn’t place much weight to them. Maybe because I was just so eager and intent to proceed.”

- Divorced Man

Both male and female participants considered a variety of factors when deciding whom to marry. These factors included ethnicity, family reputation, personality, educational goals/plans for the future, religious beliefs and practices, family structure, attractiveness and chemistry. Participants’ decisions to marry came after some form of interaction and correspondence. Deciding whom to marry was a spiritual decision for many of the participants. Some described engaging in a special decision-making prayer (salatul istikhara) to help them decide if they should move forward with the marriage. Most consulted with family members, trusted friends and imams.

Conditions for the Marriage Contract

All of the divorced and married participants completed a formal Islamic marriage contract, most often facilitated by an imam. Conditions to performing the Islamic marriage contract included some of the following: obtaining a civil marriage, the groom and bride agreeing on the marriage gift (mahr) to be presented to the bride, participating in premarital counseling, meeting with the imam beforehand and providing evidence of testing for sexually transmitted infections.

A third of the participants were not required to complete anything as a condition to performing their Islamic marriage contract, while another third were only required to obtain a civil marriage. A small minority was required to complete other conditions such as premarital counseling.

Challenges During Courtship

Misrepresentation



“I thought I knew him, but I knew like you know what, you like those questions that everybody always asks for marriage? I knew those things. But what I thought I knew about him wasn’t necessarily who he ended up being...everything I thought I knew about him before marriage turned out to be quite different after.”

- Divorced Woman

Some participants suggested that the length of the courtship was not an important issue for their decision making process. Instead, a pervasive issue across both married and divorced participants was the belief that their spouse misrepresented themselves during the courtship period. Some participants acknowledged an awareness of their spouse’s issues/shortcomings and accepted the fact that they either ignored red flags or hoped that they would change. A common practice was marrying the “potential” of their spouse rather than grounding their decision on the reality of their spouse’s present situation. An example of this was a divorced female interviewee who supported her fiancé’s plans to practice the religion more conservatively and later felt disappointed by his lack of spiritual growth and continued use of marijuana.

Fear of Rejection



“I was very uncomfortable. I think part of it was that I had been engaged before and I got burned. I think it just leaves anyone that goes through that process, from engagement to divorce...it’s a hit on your self-esteem. So then you’re nervous. What’s the family going to say? What’s she going to say? Is she going to say yes? If she says yes, then is it the right one? Is this going to work out?”

- Married Man



“Obviously, it’s a bit exciting, for a person, to think that there is a potential to find their life partner and so on. So you get ahead of yourself sometimes. I guess that’s part of the game.”

- Divorced Man

For the male participants, a pervasive theme was having a fear of rejection when approaching women for the purpose of marriage. Due to either past negative experiences or shared stories of rejections from friends, a number of the male participants experienced self-esteem issues or a loss of objectivity. Due to this fear of rejection, they focused more on securing a spouse than to properly assessing the person for compatibility.

Marriage Preparation

Informal Activities

Informal premarital resources that participants utilized included self-help books, lectures online and at Islamic events, and advice from family. Several married and divorced participants discussed personal development as an important marital preparation activity. They noted that a lack of personal self-awareness contributed to some of the conflicts in their marriage.

Formal Activities



“We were able to make the decision, get married, make the announcement within three months, four months. Plenty of people willing to throw parties, slaughter lamb for us, but no one ever said, hey, you want to sit down? Let’s talk about marriage.”

- Divorced Man

Over half of the married participants had participated in some formal premarital education or counseling activity. These activities included community workshops, taking an Islamic course on sexuality, or participating in counseling with a trained facilitator or an imam. Conversely, only two of the ten divorced participants participated in some type of formal premarital activity to prepare for marriage. Most divorced and married participants stated they would have participated in premarital counseling had someone encouraged them or required them to do so.

Marriage Education and Premarital Counseling



“The thing is that, I just feel like the imam should have an agenda outlined for you. He should counsel you. You shouldn’t be there to – if he comes to you and, do you guys have any questions? We’re not going to have any questions. We’re in the honeymoon stage.”

- Married Woman



“I think the mistake that we tend to do is we have things available once a person is engaged. Half the job has been done. At that point, they are in la la land and they are not going to listen to you even if you tell them that this is a red flag because they have announced it to the world and they are on seventh heaven. So my thing is always get them even before that.”

- Counselor

Almost all premarital counseling activities involved an imam. Counselors played a limited role and were only involved in one interviewee’s marriage preparation. When counselors were involved, it was often at a later stage in the courtship when specific issues or conflicts emerged. Unfortunately, this left insufficient time to delve into and properly address emerging concerns.

For participants who did participate in premarital counseling, the timing of the intervention tended to fall after a decision had already been made to proceed with the marriage. Rather than being used as a decision making tool, premarital counseling was used to predict future areas of conflict and discuss methods for reducing those risks.

Interventions with imams typically involved meeting only once to discuss content such as improving communication, managing finances, relationships with in-laws and the importance of marriage. Participants criticized these interventions for being too vague, generic and conservative. Participants found the intervention helpful for reinforcing things they were already doing, but unhelpful in gauging for compatibility

between the couple. The effectiveness of this intervention was also limited in cases where parents were present during a premarital counseling session, as some participants felt uncomfortable addressing emerging issues in the presence of parents.

Factors Impacting Participation in Premarital Counseling



“It would have just took an imam, someone saying, hey, this is important. You should do it. Instead, everyone is worried about dowry. About what masjid are you going to book? Cake. Everyone worried about all of that. I think that all someone would have needed to do was say Brother, you thought about Islamic marriage pre-counseling? I wouldn’t have fought it. Not one bit.”

- Divorced Man

A major reason cited for not participating was a lack of awareness that marriage required preparation. Many of the participants found the word “counseling” to be stigmatizing and believed that counseling was for individuals that had problems. Participants suggested that a lack of awareness or a negative attitude towards premarital counseling was present in their families and broader communities. This negative attitude was mostly around a fear of tainting a positive occasion in a person’s life. A short engagement period and distance/logistical challenges were also mentioned as deterring factors.

Imams had mixed feelings about whether premarital counseling should be mandated. Half of the imams recommended mandating it while the other half shared several reasons against requiring it. Imams considered factors including the couple’s age (i.e., more likely to mandate younger couples vs. older couples), willingness to participate, time availability and financial situation. Imams were particularly hesitant to mandate premarital counseling services for individuals who have been previously married. This is particularly problematic as divorced individuals are more likely to divorce in subsequent marriages.

Challenges During Marriage



“I wasn’t thinking about marriage as such a big life decision. I was just thinking, I can’t live without this person, and that was it. I thought I was going to get married and have this great comfortable life. I wasn’t anticipating all the problems that come with marriage. I was just thinking about the fairytale part. That marriage only involves two people, the husband and the wife. And...it’s just going to be like permanent dating. It was like the shock of my life.”

- Divorced Woman



“I was just thinking of it kind of like a fairy tale, like I’m going to get married. I’m going to have this great party. I’m going to go on my honeymoon. And then I’m just going to go live with my husband and we’re going to work and we’re going to make lots of money and we’re going to have a great family and we’re going to live the American dream. I think that’s why a lot of people struggle. They don’t realize you really have to work at marriage. It’s not something that just comes easy.”

- Married Woman

Married and divorced participants experienced a range of emotional, financial, sexual and spiritual challenges in their marriages. The emotional issues mentioned included negative communication patterns, name-calling, controlling behavior or dealing with a spouse’s substance use or eating disorder. Financial issues noted related to limited finances and disagreements over how to spend money. Sexual issues included feeling sexually unsatisfied with one’s spouse, disagreements on frequency of sex, experiencing sexual desires outside of marriage and infidelity. Spiritual challenges included negotiating different levels of religiosity and expectations/beliefs around Islamic practices.



Lack of Communication

Almost all the married and divorced participants experienced a lack of communication or a breakdown in communication in their marriage. Often, lack of communication resulted from a lack of time spent together while a breakdown in communication was related to having different communication styles. Several of the participants reported either feeling overextended by commitments or being married to someone who was. Competing responsibilities included spending time with family of origin, organizing or participating in religious community events, school activities and work. Several of the male participants described themselves as being leaders or having prominent roles in the community and struggling to find time for their families.

Imams also found that lack of communication was a major issue for the couples they interacted with suggesting that couples were often not frank and honest with another and could not communicate or understand on another’s needs.

Financial Challenges



“I was sick of paying all the bills. I grew up with my dad who paid all the bills. My mom just kind of, she cooked and cleaned and shopped. She taught and worked too but my dad took care of all the bills. Money became the friction between us.”

- Divorced Woman

Over half of the married and divorced participants identified financial stressors in their marriage as a major challenge. Overall, the financial challenge was related to having different financial values and beliefs (i.e., preference for spending vs. saving). For some female participants, the strain resulted from a change in lifestyle as their spouse was from a different socioeconomic background or was a student at the time of their marriage. Other female participants resented their spouses' failure in providing for the family and performing the expected male gender role. For male participants, ongoing financial stressors resulted from repaying the cost of a wedding or a home and led to some feelings of animosity.

Infidelity

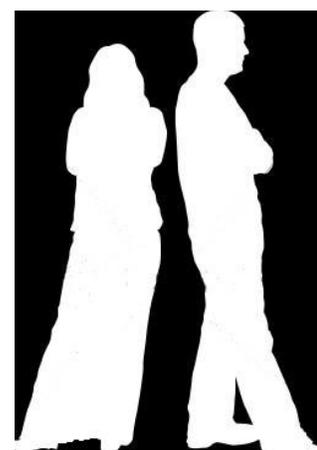


“I had one thing that I knew, if he did, I would divorce him, and that was if he cheated. So I found out he cheated, and that day, I was like, okay...It didn't really shake me, and, honestly, some people might think that would be the main reason, but it was almost like that was my way to exit, because, obviously, I was putting up with a lot, and he was putting up with a lot.”

- Divorced Woman

A third of the divorced participants attributed their divorce to infidelity. These divorced participants acknowledged that infidelity was not the only challenge in their marriage; rather, they were facing a culmination of stressors, including emotional abuse, financial strain and a breakdown in communication. These participants described the infidelity as “crossing a line” and used the infidelity to support their decision to follow through with divorce.

Half of the imams interviewed also found that infidelity was a major cause of divorce in their community. These imams described infidelity as being one of the “extreme issues” in the community along with substance abuse and gambling. They viewed these issues as pushing the marriage beyond a point of repair. Roughly a quarter of all participants identified



managing friendships and work relationships with members of the opposite sex as a challenge in their marriage. These relationships contributed to feelings of jealousy and inadequacy for some participants.

Spiritual Challenges



Approximately a third of participants experienced spiritual challenges in their marriage. Most often, participants indicated frustration with their spouse's failure to follow the religious tenets that they ascribed to. A divorced male interviewee disagreed with his wife's use of make-up in public, while a married female interviewee disagreed with her husband's suggestion that she should not wear sandals in public.

Another spiritual challenge was when a spouse introduced unfamiliar or contentious spiritual practices into the relationship. Two female participants, one divorced and one married, described feelings of discomfort with their spouse's gradual acceptance of unfamiliar religious doctrines such as Salifism and Sufism. This conflict later had a positive impact in one female interviewee's case as she determined that her husband's changing spiritual beliefs were compatible with hers and made a point to spend time with him learning and engaging with religious activities. While some participants described their shared participation in religious practices as a protection for their marriage, others emphasized the importance of respecting their spouse's choices and not forcing their participation as key to the success of their marriage. Imams also identified a lack of spirituality in one or both spouses as a major marital challenge.

Marital Interventions

Informal Activities

Both married and divorced participants participated in several informal marital strengthening activities such as reading books and articles and listening to lectures in person and online. They also reached out to informal support systems including family and mentors.

Family



“My parents didn’t really guide me in the right way. They were just like, he comes from a good family. You come from a good family. They’re more cultural, they didn’t really – like when I would tell my mom things that I wasn’t necessarily sure about, she didn’t really guide me. She would kind of stress me more, she would be like, why are you thinking like that? Why are you thinking negatively? Do you want to end the marriage? Instead of guiding me in a way that’s, oh that happens to everyone.”

- Married Woman



“My family would see that we had problems. We would fight. We came here, because it would be an issue of whose house we were going to stay at and things like that. They saw that we had problems. They could hear us fighting. They heard us arguing a lot. But it was like they didn’t think it was their place to say anything. They thought we were just going to fight forever. That’s just the nature of our relationship. So nobody really interjected.”

- Divorced Woman

Most divorced and married participants reached out to their family members when negotiating marital challenges. Generally, reaching out to family was a disappointing experience as families lacked the tools required to support couples during marital challenges. Some families were criticized for becoming overly involved and intrusive, whereas others were described as being aloof and apathetic. Another major concern was that sharing marital challenges with parents and family members created a bias against them or their spouse.

Mentors



“I think what has really helped is having other converts who are in other inter-racial relationships. Having conversations with them. I think that has been the greatest resource... Sometimes for me when I’m worried about a certain situation in our relationship like one of the wives will see me. And then they’ll notice. And I’ll be like, this is a concern I’m having. And they’re like, he went through the exact same thing. So it’s like, and then I’ll bring that up to my husband who will also be comforted by the fact that this isn’t a unique experience.”

- Married Woman

A number of married and divorced participants described seeking advice from other couples as a normalizing and positive experience for them. Mentorship was described as being particularly helpful for interracial convert couples.

Formal Activities



“...Divorce is a medicine. It is not a mocha cappuccino. You know the difference? Mocha, you take the mocha for pleasure. But you take Vicodin when you have no other way. This is what we need to emphasize. Divorce is Vicodin. It is not mocha... You seek divorce only as the last resort, not because...he yelled at me. I want to have my mocha.”

- Imam

The notion that couples pursue divorce prematurely is a pervasive belief across Muslim communities. The majority of imams interviewed countered this view, offering anecdotal evidence that the couples they counsel often face serious issues (i.e., spousal violence, substance abuse, infidelity) and do utilize a variety of resources to overcome marital challenges. All of the divorced participants had contact with either an imam or a therapist before their divorce (eight out of ten with an imam, and eight out of ten with a counselor). In fact, almost two thirds of the divorcees pursued counseling with an imam and with a counselor. Divorced participants consistently described divorce as being a last resort and overwhelmingly participated in formal counseling and intervention activities prior to making a decision to divorce.

In contrast, married participants were more likely to participate in workshops with almost two thirds participating in that activity. Four of the ten married participants had contact with an imam and only two of the ten married participants pursued counseling with a counselor.

Workshops



“I didn’t learn anything new. But I was reminded of so much that I used to use that after a while I forgot and after a while of getting busy, I let go of. And then, it got to the point where I said okay, if he is not putting in any effort, why should I put in any effort? But then I was reminded why I should put in the effort.”

- Married Woman



“We were very enlightened and very satisfied with the outlook. And we would relate back to it whenever we had an occurrence. Remember they mentioned this. Remember how they said this should not interfere with this or that. And we would relate to it.”

- Married Man

Workshops were perceived to be an effective marital activity for married participants when used in periods of low conflict. Under those circumstances, workshops were perceived to be useful because they were not individualized, and invited individuals to relate to the material being discussed. Workshops, such as PREP, normalized experiences with marriage, as participants heard other couples discuss their challenges and identified with their experiences. Workshops were a useful reminder for some couples, and while they often did not introduce anything novel or new, they were useful and encouraged the routine use of marital strengthening activities.

Conversely, workshops were perceived not to be useful for couples experiencing high and escalated levels of conflict. The effectiveness of the workshops was reduced, as there was too much resentment/anger to find exercises useful. Additionally, programming separating couples by gender (i.e., men sitting on one side, women sitting on another side) was also criticized by counselors for being ineffective. They noted that when couples sit apart, they often receive the program’s messages very differently. Sitting together as a couple and also engaging in interactive activities such as “check in” exercises are tools designed to help strengthen the relationship.

Factors Impacting Workshop Participation



“We didn’t attend that because we had a marital problem. We attended it because it was available in the community. And it was a unique subject matter where we hadn’t seen before, and because we wanted to benefit, just as a couple, by attending”

- Married Man



“It’s easy for my wife and I to go to that marriage (workshop)- we didn’t do individual marriage counseling, we went to the group one because I was like, oh our friends are, it’s a big gathering like it’s a Saturday, it should be fun. It looks like a good presentation, a good presenter. So that was easy for us.”

- Married Man



Participants cited availability of group programming as a key reason for attendance. Participants noted that their friends' attendance also influenced their decision to attend. Barriers to attending or completing marriage programming included having to make too much of a time commitment and a lack of awareness of programming in the community.

Counseling by Imams



"It was very traumatizing going through a struggling marriage and trying to seek Islamic counsel. That was challenging, because of that belief that Islam can fix it, and then being let down by imams and sheikhs, just the advice that was given was just like, really? You are not prepared for this at all. And I know I am not the first person to come to you with the issue. What you're telling me, and the approach you are taking with me, with us, you ain't got a clue, and that is sad."

- Divorced Man



"It was helpful talking to him. It didn't help the marriage, but it helped me. Honestly, I think the best thing it did was make me feel at least I am doing something and make me feel like I am reaching out to the resources available to me because I didn't want to leave and said I gave up too easily. I wanted to be able to say I tried everything."

- Divorced Woman

In attempting to resolve marital conflict, the imam's role primarily consisted of providing advice, mediation and a religious perspective. For example, imams were an important resource for discussing the lack of permissibility of certain sexual practices (e.g. anal sex, sex during menstruation) and supporting women who refused these types of sexual activity. While imams reported that they did not receive formal training in mental health and marital counseling, they noted that they did attend trainings on various family issues such as addressing marital conflict and domestic violence.

For some participants, imams played an important role in avoiding a divorce outcome. Participants reported that an imam's intervention was helpful when he clarified what the Islamic guidelines were for marriage (e.g., rights, responsibilities) and referred couples to counselors when necessary. Imams were particularly effective when they were persistent in their follow-up with couples; were perceived as being objective and

neutral; and were accessible across multiple media platforms (e.g. lecture recordings, email, etc.). Overall, imams were perceived as being more likely to maintain privacy within the community and an ideal first stop for addressing marital issues.

The imam's intervention was perceived as being less helpful when he was not flexible (e.g., not willing to meet without a spouse); only focused on information/education instead of addressing deeper emotional issues; and facilitated a short-term intervention (i.e., one session) without any follow-up.

Barriers to Seeking Support from an Imam



“The more I feel like I grow in my own individuality, my own identity, I don't think I'd feel really comfortable going to a man and asking him for help. It feels very, I don't know, just that whole gender dynamic feels uncomfortable to me”

- Married Woman



“Every imam we went to, if we were together, I would get a favorable ruling. I would listen to his response, and wow! He really just telling her, suck it up. He could get a second wife. And I am just like, what?”

- Divorced Man

Although several of the imams interviewed refuted this notion, some of the married and divorced participants believed that imams hold gendered stereotypes and are biased against women in their intervention. This was a major barrier to seeking support from imams for some female married and divorced participants who expressed feelings of discomfort with seeking counsel from a male, and felt that the imams were overly subjective. Other barriers to seeking support from an imam included the limited availability of the imam, a fear of being judged by the imam and the spouse not being invested in the idea.

Marriage Counseling



“These individual sessions weren't me talking about my wife. It was me talking about myself and some of the issues that were like more the root cause of what was causing our marital issues.”

- Married Man



“A lot of the issues were ones that I was not comfortable sharing with people. They were very, very sensitive subjects that it was hard to feel trusting in sharing it beyond that. I had forgiven things previously that I was prepared to share in a counseling or workshop or what have you, a session. But I was always ambivalent about whether it was appropriate to share something bad that had happened that she had done to me in the past in that setting.”

- Divorced Man

Some participants noted that marriage counseling provided by a counselor was effective when they incorporated faith/spirituality, and allowed couples to use the counseling as an opportunity to focus on themselves as individuals (i.e., addressing family of origin issues). Counseling was particularly useful when it allowed for self-discovery, a time to identify insecurities and to learn to form boundaries. Couples experienced some success with this intervention when they acknowledged a need for external support to address their specific marital challenges. Successful interventions often began with clarification on the purpose of therapy/counseling and provided couples with tools to identify what would best serve their needs. Counseling with a counselor was less helpful when they did not probe, were negative or imposed advice on the couple.

Most of the counselors who participated in the study were trained in nationally recognized models (e.g. PREP, Prepare and Enrich, Pick a Partner), but do not use these models strictly as designed. They tend to use a blend of culturally adapted/spiritually relevant tools or tools that they designed on their own. Counselors also use cognitive behavior therapy and dynamic, insight oriented therapies. Tools include role-playing and journaling.

Barriers to Seeking Marriage Counseling



“Anyway, she uses the word, he oppresses me. And I was just cringing when I heard this. I was like, Okay, now we can fulfill some stereotypes... he either thinks that I’m some Arab Muslim guy who doesn’t give women any rights and it’s typical, stereotypical scumbag or he thinks you’re crazy. It’s only one of two things though.”

- Divorced Man



“...before they go out with their problems to the world, living in this environment, if it can be solved with the imam, then the whole world does not need to know about it... the less we go out there, you know what I’m saying, with our problems to the people, the better we are in preserving our image in front of the people in light of the perception that others have towards Muslims”

- Imam



“I didn’t think of it. It was in my head, Muslim people don’t go to therapy. They go to the imam. They go to family. That’s how you get your problems are solved. It just really never clicked in my head that I could do it. I mean now, if I ever got married, I know that there are other options out there. I don’t have to stick to the typical Muslim ones.”

- Divorced Woman

Many of the married and divorced participants expressed a preference for seeking counseling from Muslim counselors and expressed discomfort with the idea of seeking help outside of the religious framework. These participants declined to seek assistance from non-Muslim counselors or found their interventions to be unhelpful. Chief among their concerns was a fear of reinforcing Islamophobic stereotypes when discussing their personal marital challenges. Participants expressed fears that their religion was being judged, and they did not wish to contribute to this. Unfortunately, this shifted attention away from the purpose of the intervention, limited its effectiveness and prevented participation in marital counseling when Muslim counselors were not available.

Other barriers to seeking marital counseling from a counselor included a belief that Muslims do not go to counseling, the cost of counseling, inability to find a counselor, fear of the unfamiliar, fear of a spouse using the information against them and concerns that counseling would not be useful. Others expressed concerns that their confidentiality would be broken if the counselor was from the same cultural group or social circle.

Collaborations between Imams and Counselors



“That’s the thing between the social workers and the spiritual leaders. And we’ve got to work those things out so that it benefits our clients. Well, I think, utilizing the expertise of the social workers to delve into different areas, different questions that can help me. Sometimes I could even turn it over to them. But I think that they work together. But I think that when people come to a spiritual leader, they’re looking for something different.”

- Imam



“There is this divide between the mental health workers and imams. And they don’t know each other and there isn’t that trust. And when in reality always from my personal experiences, I have to have a good relationship with imams because there are going to be some issues that you don’t know about or if you do know about, there may be alternatives that affect perspectives.”

- Counselor

A consistent theme across all four groups is that imams function as a triage in most communities as they often screen married couples and attempt to address issues with them, and if unsuccessful, refer to counselors. Overall, imams expressed a willingness to refer congregants to secular/private helping agencies, and even more so when “extreme” social issues such as substance abuse and domestic violence were involved.

Imams play a particularly important role in addressing marital challenges for two reasons. First, they can lend their credibility/authority to a counselor’s intervention by encouraging couples to buy in to marriage preparation and marriage counseling. Secondly, imams play an important role in engaging counselors and utilizing them as a resource. In many cases, the counselors interviewed only became involved in providing services to the community after an imam invited them to.

A barrier to further collaboration between imams and counselors is licensing and liability issues. Counselors expressed concerns that directly involving an imam in their practice may contradict licensing standards and privacy agreements. Imams also expressed some frustration regarding adherence to confidentiality, as they could not access information from the counselor once they had referred couples. Another barrier for imams was a fear that the process would not be collaborative and that counselors would lead the process of reconciliation. There was a perception among imams that seeking help from counselors can limit the privacy of the couple. An identified challenge that remains is creating information sharing systems for imams and counselors that provide access to information for both parties and respects the congregant’s right to privacy.



Conclusion

While extensive research demonstrates the efficacy of marriage education programs and counseling interventions across a wide variety of cultures and sectors of American society, this preliminary study demonstrates the interest and willingness of American Muslim stakeholders, including religious leadership, married couples, divorcees, and mental health professionals to adapt and implement premarital education and marital interventions in the American Muslim community. Based on data from the in-depth interviews, as well as an extensive literature review and consultation with a team of experts, recommendations were developed for the American Muslim community. They are summarized in the Recommendations section.

Several barriers to utilizing marriage education and counseling interventions among our participants are commonly seen in other communities and cultures and include: perceived stigma in seeking help, lack of awareness about resources, financial restrictions, difficulty accessing mental health providers, and working with clergy who have limited training and experience in counseling. Particular challenges observed by this group of American Muslim individuals that may also be seen in other more traditional subcultures, are informed by the courtship process, limited premarital relationship experience, strict gender boundaries, and the central role of negotiating Islamic traditions in American Muslim marriages. Although the sample is not fully representative of the diversity of American Muslims, this study is a first step toward developing effective community based programming and intervention models designed to prevent divorce and promote healthy marriages in the American Muslim community.

Recommendations

Community Members

1. Take responsibility.

- Develop self-knowledge before deciding to marry. Understand your personality, communication style, values, experiences and how they impact your expectations about marriage.
- Explore family of origin issues and carefully examine your motivation for entering marriage. Consider seeking individual counseling as an effective tool for addressing past and emerging issues.
- Remember that differences in perspectives and disagreements are natural and expected in marriage. Refine yourself instead of trying to change your partner. Assume individual responsibility for issues within your control.

2. Take your time.

- The getting to know you process or courtship period was identified as an important predictor for relationship satisfaction and sustainability.
- Don't rush into marriage, and don't ignore red flags. Use the courtship period in a meaningful and effective way. Consider compatibility, ask difficult questions, get to know your potential spouse in various situations and address issues of concern before you become emotionally involved.
- If you're experiencing conflict in your relationship, don't make an impulsive decision about divorce. Seek guidance from professionals.

3. Equip yourself.

- Participate in premarital counseling^l before committing to marriage. Premarital counseling can help you discuss expectations and goals and teach you communication and conflict resolution skills.
- To maintain a healthy marriage, read books and articles and participate in marriage education workshops with your partner. Marriage is a life-long investment; seek knowledge^{ll} to keep your love growing.

4. Reach out and seek support.

- Every couple experiences conflict at some point. Don't wait for problems to get worse before seeking help. Don't tolerate abuse in any form. Address it at the first instance.
- Counseling can help you resolve differences and strengthen relationship. Find a trained professional who can offer guidance while respecting your religious values.

5. Learn from your experiences.

- If your marriage ends, use the experience as an opportunity to learn about yourself and acquire new resources and skills to build a healthier relationship in the future.
- Connect with other divorcees to seek support and to learn from each other.

I PREPARE/ENRICH: <https://www.prepare-enrich.com> | FOCCUS: <http://www.foccusinc.com>

II National Healthy Marriage Resource Center: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/index.aspx>

Imams & Mosque Leadership

1. Commit to making healthy marriages a top priority for the Muslim community.

- Change the messaging about marriage. Promote healthy marriage and family life as being vital for the health of the community. Present balanced and realistic messages about marriage as an active investment that requires continued work instead of a romanticized fantasy in which soul mates effortlessly live happily ever after. Use Friday sermons, religious classes, and community lectures as a platform to emphasize the importance of marriage education, counseling, and support.
- Participate in national marriage initiatives such as the ISSA Sakinah Healthy Marriage Initiative^{III}, National Muslim Marriage Week^{IV} (Ramadan 1-7), and Marriage Week USA^V (February 7-14).
- Establish a zero tolerance policy for abuse and outline a strategy for safety and accountability. Empower women to seek knowledge about their rights in Islam.
- Encourage couples to be more involved in their marriage ceremony by including a public or private affirmation of their commitment to each other and to promoting healthy marriages.

2. Offer a diverse selection of community education programs.

- Provide an array of marriage and family life strengthening activities for the entire family addressing topics such as selecting a spouse, communication and conflict resolution skills, and parenting. Host lectures, workshops and seminars as a collaborative effort between religious scholars and counseling professionals. Publicize these events and encourage individuals and their families to participate.
- Organize programs to prepare individuals for marriage, as well as to enhance and strengthen existing marriages. Establish support groups and develop targeted programs for divorced individuals so that they can feel a sense of belonging in the community and prepare for healthy remarriage.

3. Start education early and involve parents.

- Muslim youth often have an idealized perception of marriage, so speak with them early on about the reality of marriage. Use Sunday school and youth forums to teach young people about healthy marriages and the importance of premarital counseling and support.
- Educate parents about how to be supportive mentors for their children during the marriage process. Promote candid discussions to differentiate between religious and cultural expectations regarding marriage, parenting, and other aspects of family life.

4. Create venues for appropriate socialization.

- There is a need for singles' programming in the American Muslim community. Extreme forms of gender segregation inhibit young Muslims from learning how to appropriately interact with the other gender.
- Provide social opportunities for singles to learn about marriage and meet potential spouses.

5. Celebrate healthy marriages.

- Recognize exemplary couples that inspire others. Host an Exemplary Marriage Contest and encourage community members to nominate couples who exemplify healthy marriages.
- Host an annual celebrating marriage event to celebrate couples who have reached marriage milestones. Commemorate couples when they reach the 5, 10, 20+ year mark of marriage.
- Highlight healthy marriages in a community newsletter, website, or at an event. Invite the couples to share tips about maintaining a healthy and successful marriage.

6. Develop a marriage database.

- Develop a database at each mosque to archive information about the marriages and divorces being conducted. Recording this data can help the Muslim community chronicle trends in family life and develop more effective long-term solutions for divorce and family conflict.

7. Emphasize the importance of premarital counseling and couple checkups.

- Require couples to participate in at least three sessions of premarital counseling with a trained counselor prior to officiating the marriage ceremony. Teach couples to use premarital counseling as a means to make a decision about marriage. Provide couples with an inventory of questions to assess compatibility. Help couples assess their readiness for marriage and clarify their expectations.
- Seek training in premarital counseling or refer couples to professionals trained in premarital counseling.
- Offer couple checkups after one year to assess the progress of a marriage and provide early intervention and support as needed.

8. Encourage professional counseling.

- Refer individuals and couples to counseling professionals when there are mental health issues and marital conflict. Post a list of local counseling professionals and resources on the mosque website.

- Discuss counseling openly to normalize help seeking. Organize a campaign to address the stigma of counseling. Publicize via community newsletters and mosque websites or email lists.
- Normalize paying for counseling services in the same way one would pay for other health services. Encourage commitment to counseling by reminding individuals that Muslims must take care of their mental health in addition to their physical health.
- Encourage young Muslims to pursue careers in mental health, social work, and counseling.

9. Collaborate with counseling professionals.

- Develop a network of counseling professionals for access to resources and referrals.
- Actively engage and invite counselors to play a role in the mosque. For example, invite a counseling professional to be a member of the mosque board.
- Contract with qualified professionals. For example, arrange for the first counseling session to be offered free of charge or at a reduced cost for any referrals from the mosque.
- Seek training from counseling professionals in basic counseling skills and mental health first aid.

III Sakinah Healthy Marriage Initiative: <http://www.issausa.org>

IV National Muslim Marriage Week:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/National-Muslim-Marriage-Week/105792046141305>

V Marriage Week USA: <http://www.nationalmarriageweekusa.org>

Counseling Professionals

1. Collaborate with imams and community leaders.

- Reach out to mosques and establish relationships with imams and community leaders.
- Offer training and consultation services to train imams and community leaders in marriage education. Help them develop a system for referrals.
- Refer individuals seeking spiritual guidance to imams.

2. Be more accessible.

- Consider various platforms for offering counseling services e.g. teleconferencing, video conferencing and home visits, as well as having evening and weekend hours.
- Consider offering a sliding scale fee for services or contracting services at the mosque for a reduced cost.
- Develop and make available a list of resources in different geographic regions. Share readily with local mosques, particularly imams and community leaders.

3. Train marriage educators in the community.

- Identify individuals in the community who are willing to be trained as marriage educators. Marriage educators can help reduce the risk of divorce by coaching couples in communication and conflict resolution skills and referring couples to professional help as needed.

4. Offer cultural competency training.

- Train non-Muslim providers on how to deliver culturally sensitive services to Muslim clients in order to improve quality of care and increase utilization of services.
- Train Muslim providers to deliver services respectful of the various subcultures of the American Muslim community.

5. Develop customized marriage education.

- Utilize existing Islamically based marriage education programs.
- Adapt existing secular programming to the cultural values of Muslims, which can contribute to a greater acceptance of these curriculums and increase their effectiveness within the Muslim community.

Endnotes

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