



Community Brief: Promoting Healthy Marriages & Preventing Divorce in the American Muslim Community



In the United States, it is estimated that approximately half of all first marriages will end in divorce¹. Divorce can negatively impact families, and it is becoming increasingly recognized that healthy marriages are critical to society given the associated physical, emotional, and financial benefits for families.

According to a study² conducted in the early 1990s, the North American Muslim divorce rate is estimated to be at 31%. 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 a foundation for a healthy marriage.

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For more information about the study, please visit:
<http://www.ispu.org/marriage>

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Introduction and Background

Marriage is a cherished bond. Although divorce is permitted in Islam, it is considered a last option. Couples are encouraged to be proactive in establishing and maintaining a healthy and strong relationship, and to explore all possible remedies before pursuing divorce.

Prevention and intervention approaches are necessary tools that can help couples achieve satisfying, stable, and long-lasting successful marriages. Focused on teaching couples relationship skills, these approaches fall into two main types of activities: 1) Marriage Education Programs and 2) Counseling Interventions.

Marriage Education Programs focus on preventing relationship problems and teaching couples communication and conflict resolution skills. They are used to prepare couples for marriage and to 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-Maghrib's Love Notes seminar or research-based workshops such as PREP or PREPARE/ENRICH.

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.

Although marriage education programs and counseling interventions have been implemented in many ethnic and faith community contexts, there is no standard marriage programming model for American Muslim communities. Little is known 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 divorce³. As the American Muslim community in the United States grows, so does the need for culturally and religiously sensitive healthy marriage and divorce prevention programming.

Scope of the Study

This study identifies the marriage education and counseling intervention needs of American Muslims as the result of an extensive literature review, consultation with a team of experts, and in-depth interviews with 33 individuals from the American Muslim community in Michigan. The 33 individuals were from four key groups (six imams, seven counselors, ten divorced individuals and ten married individuals) across various ethnic groups and educational and economic backgrounds.



Interview Findings

The in-depth interviews explored: 1) experiences with marriage education programs and counseling interventions, 2) perceptions of the effectiveness and relevance of such activities in the American Muslim community, and 3) beliefs about the marriage education programs and counseling intervention needs of American Muslims. Outlined below are some general findings with representative quotations from the interviews.

Most divorced and married interviewees did not have a framework to help them get to know someone and to determine compatibility for marriage.

“There was an expectation to have meaningful conversations about the future and hash out some of that. But the actual achieving of it or the actual content of those conversations was not at all specified. And there wasn’t any guidance in terms of how to have those conversations or what they should entail.” –Divorced Man

Divorced and married interviewees were often unaware that marriage required preparation and investment, and had received limited education about marriage.

“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

“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

Premarital education is not considered to be important by families.

“A lot of time people will say- I want to get the pre-marriage education but everybody says I don’t need to. Or especially

with the immigrant parents, they will be like what’s the point. People have been getting married all these years. They never had pre-marriage education.” –Counselor

Most divorced and married interviewees did not participate in premarital counseling, and were not required to by the imams who married them.

“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

“So during our first year, there was a lot of stuff that I feel should have been addressed during the engagement period, things that I still hadn’t made peace with.”

–Married Man

Many divorced and married interviewees would have participated in premarital counseling if they had known about it and were encouraged or required to do it.

“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

“I just feel like the Imam should have an agenda outlined for you. He should counsel you. We’re not going to have any questions. We’re in the honeymoon stage.”

–Married Woman

Interview Findings continued

Most divorced interviewees pursued professional individual or marriage counseling for their marital problems; however, counseling usually occurred after their problems had escalated.

"We thought we could deal with (it) on our own. By the time we did (counseling), we were at a stage where it was going to take a miracle. And we did everything we could possibly do at that point. But I just wish it was a decision we could have made earlier." –**Divorced Man**

Most divorced interviewees met with an imam to resolve their marital conflict and were disappointed with the advice they received. Many Imams are not trained to provide relationship and mental health counseling. All groups interviewed distinguished between the expertise of the imam and of counseling professionals.

"I believe in Islam...but I also think there's practicality in Islam...I don't need advice that just says, well, just be patient and just respect your husband...And pray more. And ask Allah to help you." –**Divorced Woman**

"We put so much faith into our Imams. The Imam is not a marriage counselor. So the couples have this faith in the Imam that if the Imam can't help us, then it is just doom and gloom, because that is the pedestal that we put them on. The Imam hasn't been through any training for marriage. He knows the Quran, but he doesn't know the dynamics of an interpersonal relationship. That is a science in and of its own." –**Divorced Man**

Imams play an integral role in the community. They are an invaluable resource for providing referrals to local Muslim counseling professionals, and education on the importance of marriage education, counseling, and other forms of support.

"...Sometimes we refer them to professional counselors...In many cases I give them the contact information. I tell them why is it [sic] important for them to go and what we can offer here and what we cannot offer here. It's like a physician referring a patient to a specialist. So most of the time people understand and they go." –**Imam**

Imams and counseling professionals must work together.

"There is this divide between the mental health workers and Imams. And they don't know each other and there isn't that trust. You need to have the connection between the Imams and the mental health workers who have some basic understanding of each other's field

and discipline to engage in a dialogue and discussion about what to do for specific cases." –**Counselor**

American Muslim counselors are a resource to and source of support for the community. Most of the American Muslim counseling professionals interviewed were trained in at least one nationally recognized marriage preparation program.

"It is my hope that Muslim couples take advantage of every resource, and they see these resources and tools as just that-resources and tools. Not as a stigma. Not as something that is shameful or would set us back. But as a natural part of life and as something that is enhancing...We are supposed to reach out when we are in need. We have so many examples of people asking the Prophet (pbuh) questions, and that's normal...so... how do we rediscover our tradition in a way that makes sense for the Muslim American family?" –**Counselor**

The American Muslim community has marriage education and counseling needs. However, social stigma is a common barrier to seeking counseling. Overcoming this social stigma is critical to the health of the American Muslim community.

"I was embarrassed. I never talked about my problems. I didn't want to admit I had a problem because, mostly, I didn't want to air my dirty laundry." –**Divorced Woman**

"What I find a lot of times is people pretend that everything is okay and even though there are resources out there, you know they don't know about it or they don't feel comfortable accessing it." –**Counselor**

"It helps to be able to get gatekeepers, and those individuals who are respected within the community to really latch onto the idea and really be the champions for this. Because if they are able to normalize it and make it okay, it is more likely that people will be willing to accept it and to really it just be a natural thing, like everyone is talking about it. Everyone is talking about the need. Just as you get your vaccines, you get your pre-marital education vaccine and post-marriage education vaccine. We just need to take that approach." –**Counselor**

Based on the interviews, there is strong support for a multi-pronged approach, including both marriage education programs and counseling interventions to address the current and future marital challenges in the American Muslim community.



Recommendations

Based on data from the in-depth interviews, existing research, and expert opinions, the following recommendations were developed:

Recommendations for Community Members

Take responsibility.

- Develop self-knowledge before deciding to marry. Understand your personality, communication style, values, experiences, and how they impact expectations about marriage.
- 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.

Take your time.

- Don't rush into marriage, and don't ignore red flags. Consider compatibility, ask difficult questions, get to know your potential spouse in various situations, and address issues of concern before becoming emotionally involved.
- If there is conflict in your relationship, don't make an impulsive decision about divorce. Seek guidance from professionals.



Equip yourself.

- Participate in premarital counseling⁴ before committing to marriage.
- To maintain a healthy marriage, read books and articles and participate as a couple in marriage education workshops. Marriage is a life-long investment; so seek knowledge⁵ to keep your love growing.

Reach out and seek support.

- Every couple experiences conflict at some point. Don't let problems 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 relationships. Find a trained professional who can offer guidance while respecting your religious values.

Learn from your experiences.

- If your marriage ends, use it 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.

Recommendations continued

Recommendations for Imams & Mosque Leadership

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

- Change the messaging about marriage. Promote healthy marriage and family life as 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 Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) Sakinah Healthy Marriage Initiative⁶, National Muslim Marriage Week⁷ (Ramadan 1-7), and Marriage Week USA⁸ (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.

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.
- Begin early and involve parents. 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.

- Organize programs to prepare individuals for marriage, as well as to enhance and strengthen existing marriages.
- Provide social opportunities for singles to learn about marriage and meet potential spouses.
- 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.

Celebrate healthy marriages.

- Host annual events recognizing exemplary couples and celebrating marriage milestones.
- 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.

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.

Emphasize the importance of premarital counseling and couple check ups.

- 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. Otherwise, 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.

Recommendations continued

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.

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.

Recommendations for Counseling Professionals

Collaborate with imams and community leaders.

- Reach out to mosques and establish relationships with imams and community leaders.
- Offer training and consultation services in marriage education to mosque leaders and imams.
- Refer individuals seeking spiritual guidance to imams.

Be accessible.

- Consider various platforms for offering counseling services including teleconferencing and if possible, home visits, as well as being available in the evenings and on weekends.
- 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.

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.

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.

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.



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ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan think tank and research organization committed to conducting objective, empirical research and offering expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing the United States. These issues include U.S. foreign policy, national security, the economy, and public health. In addition, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines and built a solid reputation as a trusted source for information about American Muslims and Muslim communities around the world.

ISPU scholars provide insight into the major debates taking place across the country. They offer context-specific analysis and recommendations to journalists, policymakers, and the general public through reports, policy briefs, articles, op-eds and books. ISPU disseminates its publications through a variety of channels and holds regular congressional briefings, policy events and academic conferences.

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Endnotes

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