IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature (IMPACT: IJRHAL)
ISSN (P): 2347-4564; ISSN (E): 2321-8878
Vol. 7, Issue 1, Jan 2019, 27-36

FACTORS STRENGTHENING MARRIAGE: A REVIEW ON WHAT BINDS COUPLES TOGETHER

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Received: 27 Dec 2018 **Accepted:** 05 Jan 2019 **Published:** 09 Jan 2019

ABSTRACT

In the face of increasing contact with the western world, we find that many new trends are shaping up in India while at the same time many trends seem to be losing their value. As evident from the growing divorce rates, the institution of marriage seems to be losing its sanctity. Moreover, we find various emerging trends that are slowly replacing marriage. However, they are unable to provide the comfort and security that humans as social beings seek. Therefore it is important to have a look at the factors that are helpful in sustaining a marriage in this era of transition. This research aims to highlight the factors that strengthen the relationship among married couples so that the youth can look forward to reasons for getting married, rather than seeking its alternatives. These findings can help in retaining the validity of the institution of marriage which appears to be losing its significance in the fast changing scenario.

KEYWORDS: *Marriage, Relationship, Security. Youth*

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is the most fundamental institution of human society, one that has existed since time immemorial and that is bound to exist for centuries to come, given its significance. In fact, most human activities are classified into desirable or undesirable on the basis of their ability to find a good mate. This said it is clear how important a role marriage plays in human existence. But a happy marriage is far more important than just a marriage. This is because marriage means the decision to not just spend, but also share the rest of our life with another person. A range of studies identify marriage as the basic structure of life and family system and recognize it as essential in maintaining an individual's psychological well-being (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Williams, 2003). In fact, studies suggest that these days couples are less satisfied with their marriages as compared to couples many years ago (Hall, 2006). Therefore studying factors that make a marriage, 'a happy marriage' are even more essential in today's context. Now, let us turn to the question as to how social psychologists define marital satisfaction and what factors facilitate it.

It was somewhere in 1970's that systematic and experimental researches on the shared interactions between couples were undertaken (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, & Krokoff, 1989). This was done with the objective to find out about the factors affecting the quality of marriage (Hall, 2006).

Olson & Olson (2000) pointed out ten categories involved in successful marriages. In the order of ranking these are communication, flexibility, closeness, personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, leisure activities, family and friends, financial management and spiritual beliefs.

Social psychologists refer to a combination of marital quality and marital happiness, together as a measure of marital satisfaction. Roach. Et al., (1981) defined marital satisfaction as "One's subjective evaluation of favourability towards her/his spouse and the marital relationship." This indicates that for one to be satisfied in marriage, it is essential to have a positive outlook for the partner and the relationship. Stone & Shackelford, 2007, define marital satisfaction in terms of perceived cost and benefits to a particular person. If a person perceives more benefits associated with marriage then s/he perceives it as more satisfying as compared to when the costs associated are higher.

Schoen. Et al., (2002) define marital satisfaction as "a global evaluation of the state of one's marriage and a reflection of marital happiness and functioning"

Sandhya (2009) in her study on married urban Hindu couples focussed on their daily lives in terms of how they resolve conflicts, what factors contribute to their happiness etc., in both love and arranged marriages. She found that empathy, validation, and support were important for both men and women. Wives complained of less intimacy and less help in terms of daily chores. She found that despite changing contexts, control over resources was with the earner in the family and egalitarianism was emerging only very slowly. One interesting finding was that satisfaction for women was hampered by high expectations resulting from westernized notions of love and intimacy.

When discussing marital satisfaction, an emerging framework of marital virtues is gaining considerable attention today. The term virtue was highly emphasized by Aristotle, who defined it as the 'harmonious internal state'. Fowers (1998, 2000, 2001), the pioneer of marital virtues stated that these are the key factors that contribute to a satisfied marriage. In his book 'Beyond The Myth of Marital Happiness,'he focused on the role of various factors such as generosity, friendship, loyalty, courage etc. These factors, according to Fowers, are the deepest ideals that we should try and pursue in our marriage. Fowers defines virtues as "the personal qualities or character strength that make it possible for persons to live a good or worthwhile life," based on Aristotelian ethics (2001). This concept was later operationalized by Hawkins, Blanchard, Fawcett, and Jenkins (2007). Just like virtues are essential for a balanced life, marital virtues are essential for marital contentment. For without virtues, a marriage would simply exist as a functional relationship between two needful individuals. And marriage definitely is more than just that!

Let us now look at certain virtues that seem to play an essential role in marital satisfaction.

Trust: Trust is a term that most of us are familiar with. It occupies the utmost importance in any relationship. It can be described as the feeling where we know we can rely on a person without being let down. It involves putting in a set of confidence towards the trusted other that s/he will or will not indulge in acts that outrage one's trust. It is the most basic form of human belief without which successful relationships are impossible. Trust has been recognized as an important determinant of a mutual relationship (Gurtman, 1992; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2006). On the other hand, betrayal is negatively related to marital satisfaction (Atkins, Bauco, Christensen, 2005; Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001).

Ross (2009) found that for a relationship to be successful there should be a degree of belief in each other and each other's words. Moreover, promises and commitment should be such that partners can rely on their authenticity. It is also important to note, that when there is a lack of trust, it gives rise to suspicions which leads to a fall in the quality of any relationship. This paves way for jealousy and mistrust. Therefore by trusting your partner and more importantly by not letting the trust break, one can improve not only their marriage but also ascertain a degree of freedom in their partner, which leads to the growth of both the individual and the relationship.

William and Mark (2008) found in their assessment of marital adjustment in the first two years of the marital relation, that interpersonal trust along with other factors like desired spousal behavior change etc. is highly associated with marital satisfaction. These studies reinforce the widely held belief that trust is the foundation for any relationship and to keep the marriage going, it is essential not only to trust the partner but also to be able to maintain partner's trust by maintaining integrity and loyalty.

Forgiveness: To err is human, to forgive divine. Human beings are bound to make mistakes, big or small. Mistakes are a part of life and they are the most essential essence of human growth and learning. Though mistakes are unavoidable, they have the tendency to cause hurt to another person, especially when it involves an intimate relationship. Sometimes mistakes also take the form of blunders and it becomes very difficult for partners to overcome them. What should the next step be? Though there are many possibilities, the most positive one especially in terms of a close relationship, is forgiveness. Forgiveness is not only helpful for the one who is at fault but also for the one who has borne the brunt. It leads to healing and the end of negativity. Forgiveness is very rightly defined as "a positive interpersonal and social change while an unjust hurt happens in social relation, a fault positioned in the interpersonal realm" (Allemand et al, 2007; Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006).

(Gayatrivadu et. al, 2014) conducted a study on the role of forgiveness and resilience in relation to marital satisfaction in the Indian context, and found that forgiveness was significantly correlated with marital satisfaction and that hostile feelings may even permanently damage a relationship.

In a relationship involving lifelong companionship it is very important to forgive and move on, or else grudges will form and ruin the relationship. According to Hill, 2001, forgiveness is essential not only for one's own emotional well-being, but also for reinstating relationships, regardless of the circumstances. Magyar (2001) found that individuals, who have forgiven their spouse, evaluate their marital relations as more satisfying than others. Therefore, forgiveness plays a very important role in marital satisfaction, as without it every mistake however grave or silly will hold the power to ruin a relationship and lead to accumulation of complains, later causing outbursts.

Gratitude: Gratitude as a variable is gaining considerable importance in enhancing the quality of life. And rightly so! Gratitude in simplest terms refers to the quality of being thankful about what you have in life. The age-old saying, "count your blessings not your troubles" explains very finely as to what gratitude is. It is the fine art of appreciating the positives and overlooking the negatives. It has been suggested that grateful individuals have three main characteristics; a sense of abundance, an appreciation of the normal everyday pleasures in life, and an attitude of thankfulness toward the way other people promote their well-being (Watkins et al., 2003). How gratitude works so magically in relationships is because

it helps in focussing on what we have rather than what we don't. It inculcates a habit of emphasizing on the positive. Prior studies show that gratitude enables individuals to derive benefits from negative life events (Watkins, Cruz, Holben, &Kolts, 2008). This indicates that negative experiences in a relationship can be overcome and dealt with the help of gratitude. The partners are able to have a more positive outlook about their relationship and thus negativities, though exist, seem to lose their importance. Gratefulness inculcates positive affect (Watkins et al., 2003) and affectivity is significantly related to marital satisfaction (Gordon & Baucom, 2009).

Mitchell, 2010, in his study found that expressing gratitude led to an enhancement in felt intimacy. Also, gratitude was found to be correlated with marital satisfaction and expressing gratitude made couples happier with their marriage.

Frederickson, 2004 indicated that gratitude can help in compensating for the negativities that one encounters in a relationship by overpowering them with positivity. An individual"s expressed gratitude is significantly related to her or his spouse's received support, felt intimacy, and marital satisfaction. Therefore by being more grateful towards our partner, one can ensure that positive will dominate the negative thus making the relationship more soothing and joyous.

Respect: In a long-term relationship, more than the big things that we do on specific occasions, it is the small things that we do daily that matters. Respecting one's partner is not a matter of a day or month. It is a continuous manifestation that is reflected through verbal and non-verbal expressions and makes a huge difference in relationships. It is how respected a partner feels, besides other factors like love, trust, and fidelity, that make marriage more satisfied (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). Fatima and Ajmal, 2012, in their study found that respect was an important factor to determine marital happiness in married females. Danesh and Heydarian (2006) found that couples, who were more respectful and loved their spouses, were more satisfied in their marriage. There was a positive correlation between the amount of respect and love among couples. Mirahmadizadeh et al. (2003) argued that marital satisfaction was greater among couples who have mutual respect. Also conveying appreciation in a marital relationship may help in enhancing positive exchanges, and promoting its well-being. (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996).

Fredrickson (2004) maintains that frequent experiences of positive emotions, help to build cognitive resources, which in turn could provide partners with the ability to think in more positive ways about their relationship. As and when a partner feels respected, s/he will also feel the need to reciprocate the same. This will create a cycle wherein respect would prevail. Homes, where there is lack of respect and more of disrespect, tend to break and there is only chaos and dissatisfaction. The need to strengthen laws against domestic violence presents an extreme example of how lack of respect can lead to broken houses. Although domestic violence is caused due to various factors but lack of respect for a partner as an individual is one major cause. Therefore to move towards a more satisfying and pleasing relationship, sowing the seeds of respect will go a long way.

Humility: Pride is concerned with who is right, humility with what is right. A humble person does not simply lack arrogance or self-focus but also possesses qualities like being modest (Roberts & Wood, 2003). This makes the partner feel more in touch with the spouse thus creating a secure bond.

Humility is defined as a "characteristic and enduring way of being more humble, mod-est, respectful, and open-minded than arrogant, self-centered, or conceited." (Peters et al., 2011)

What makes humility important in an intimate relationship? Though very limited research has been done to link humility with relationship quality, related researches reveal that it indeed plays a vital role in improving relationships. It is so because humility is related to various positive traits that make an individual likeable and thus aids in improving relationships. Humility has been found to be related to awareness like one cannot control all social situations, gentleness, and empathy (Means, Wilson, Sturn, Biron, & Back, 1990). By displaying traits such as these, humble people tend to be more approachable and produce a sense of security, and are thus more like.

Landrum, 2011, suggested that humble persons are liked more than their arrogant counterpart. This influences relationship quality in a positive way. Humility has also been found to be associated with another prosocial behavior such as forgiving a family member (Worthington, 1998; Powers et al. 2007), cooperative behaviour in an economic game (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009) and helpfulness (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & McCullough, 2010). The fact that humility is associated with such desirable qualities make humble people more attractive. Peters, Rowatt & Johnson, 2011, in their study found that dispositional humility was positively related to social relationship quality even when social desirability was controlled. As Paulo freire said, "dialogue cannot exist without humility". When a person is humble, s/he is more likely to think considerately about the other person, for, an arrogant person cannot think about anyone but self. Therefore the virtue of humility brings in a relationship the ability to see the partner in a better light thus serving the relationship better.

Communication

Having discussed the role of marital virtues, let us now turn to another important facet of marital satisfaction that is communication.

What is the basic process that underlies all human interactions? Everything under the sun, from hunger to anger, from the need to greed is expressed through communication, verbal or non-verbal. Couples are no exception to this. Howell, 1972, defines communication as "the capacity to express the feelings, beliefs, and desires of one person to another through verbal and nonverbal clues which are understood, acknowledged, and responded to by the recipient." Now that communication is the basic process of all interactions, it is obvious that its quality makes a huge difference in a relationship. Analogously communication plays a significant role in marriage too. Marital communication is "a constant exchange of information—of messages—between the two spouses by speech, letter writing, talking on the telephone, the exhibition of bodily or facial expression, and other methods as well." (Lederer & Jackson, 1968). Communication provides a sense of continuity in relationships. Lack of it can bring relationships to a point of stagnation, wherein the flow of energy between partners may come to a standstill. Lippert & Prager (2001), suggest that intimacy in relationships is apparent when both partners display signs of disclosing, listening, and understanding.

Alihosseini et al. 2014, found that training Nonviolent Communication skill was helpful in improving a couple's satisfaction, couple's communication, conflict resolution, and couple's sexual relation. By being trained in reconstructing their models of expression, better listening and making a better choice of words, couples reported higher satisfaction in relationships and better conflict resolution.

In communication, listening plays a very essential role. But only listening will not be effective unless it involves actively responding and taking interest in what the partner is saying. Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. Bray and Jouriles (1995) noted that most marital programs promote active listening and validation of each spouses' position, which is believed to encourage less defensive discussions. Active listening's benefits are manifold, the most important of which are (e.g., Gordon, 1974, Rogers and Farson, 1957) Avoidance of misunderstandings, Disturbing feelings fade, Increased trust, Demonstrating respect, Revealing the core of the problem, a Higher sense of responsibility. Thus active listening is helpful in enhancing the quality of communication as well as relationships.

Among various aspects of communication, one very essential is emotional validation. Darrington & Brower, 2012, emphasised on the role of emotional validation for effective communication among partners. Emotional validation refers to accepting a person's feeling and then nurturing it. It is about understanding a person's emotional experience. It makes the partner feel understood and thus increases closeness between partners. When a person feels that his or her emotions are being validated, an instant bond is formed with the validator. There is a sense of understanding that is instantly felt due to this reinforcement by the partner.

Another important part of communication is feedback. It is the end process of communication wherein the listener responds. If there is no response, the speaker may feel ignored and even rejected. Whereas responding positively to a partner's disclosure supports the development of intimacy in the relationship. Responsive partners report higher intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005). Therefore feedback serves as an important cue to active listening thus strengthening communication and in turn marital satisfaction.

Another very essential yet underrated aspect of communication is non-verbal communication, which is communicating through gestures, proxemics, body language, facial expressions etc. According to one study, only 7% of our message comes from the actual words we speak, 93% of the message comes from either the tone or the inflection in our voice or our body language (Haner, 2011). It is important to focus on the non-verbal aspect because while words to some extent can be manipulated or at least controlled, non-verbal communication cannot be. It is very natural and unless practiced, it is beyond our control to manipulate it, especially in spontaneous exchanges. Thus it is a very reliable form of interaction which actually speaks louder than words! Also, intimate relationships are nourished and sustained nonverbally (Dale & Dale, 1978). Therefore we can conclude that non-verbal communication is an extremely important factor when it comes to relationship satisfaction. Basic textbooks (e.g., Verderber & Verderber, 1998) and other sources, (e.g., Tannen, 1990), along with a significant number of studies (e.g., Hall, 1984; Noller, 1984, 1992), all validate that non-verbal communication is an important factor in considering marital satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

Marital satisfaction thus may be achieved by constantly working on marital virtues and the pattern of communication shared among couples. By inculcating the right balance of virtues and improving the way in which couples communicate, a marriage can be transformed into a journey that a couple will cherish throughout their lives.

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