

Facilitating Marriage Education As Institutions

(Note: The content of this document is primarily for Bahá'í Local Spiritual Assemblies, 9-member elected councils. However, the content may also be useful for National Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils, Regional Training Institutes, Continental Counselors, and their various appointees)

“Learning in action...” (Universal House of Justice, 1-13-03)

“The more we do, the more we learn.” (International Teaching Centre, 9-30-07)

What Is Marriage Education?

Marriage education is a process of teaching important knowledge, skills, and attitudes about relationships and marriage. Marriage education is not counseling or therapy, but instead it focuses on building understanding and competence. In other words, its purpose is to build capacity and strengths and equip people to be successful in their roles as relationship partners and then as marriage partners. It begins with preparation for relationships and marriage for individuals and couples of all ages and experience levels. Marriage education provides marriage-strengthening tools for happily married couples. It can also provide skill building and assistance for deeply troubled couples considering separation or divorce, although this education is usually best paired with help from a trained counselor. Marriage education's focus is on taking timely actions to prevent future problems.

The Role of Local Spiritual Assemblies

Couples with the intent to marry may approach Bahá'í Local Spiritual Assemblies to seek guidance on marriage preparation. These couples often have limited knowledge and skills to sustain their marriages, and Spiritual Assemblies may have a set of study materials prepared—instead, they may be uncertain about what to offer the couple. Marriage educators can assist Assemblies in preparing materials or courses that provide couples with needed spiritually-compatible guidance.

Couples will also involve Assemblies in officiating their Bahá'í weddings, as the Assembly is responsible for ensuring individuals and couples uphold Bahá'í and civil marriage laws. This responsibility includes ensuring the couple willingly chose each other without parental interference, consents are complete, witnesses are selected and appropriate, and a Bahá'í ceremony occurs.

Couples who are already married, and who are struggling with difficulties or complex issues, may also approach Spiritual Assemblies for support and guidance. Assisting these couples can often be a daunting and time-consuming challenge for Assemblies and, where available, their counseling committees. This is especially true when the couples are influenced by a culture that often encourages gender inequality and divorce and discourages commitment. The spiritual, emotional, financial, and physical consequences from separation or divorce can be very challenging for the individuals, families, and communities involved. Spiritual Assemblies may struggle to maintain the unity and functioning of their own institutions when the problems, separations, and divorces occur amongst their own members.

Commitment to having healthy marriages may involve providing relationship education for youth, high-quality marriage preparation materials, and programs that assist couples to know each other's character and families. These education efforts help to ensure couples know how to work in partnership to create happy, lasting, and spiritually-based marriages. An Assembly's commitment may also include having ongoing strengthening sessions for marriages that support their sustainability, not just offering referrals to professional remedial counseling and indicating recommended actions for marriages that are in trouble, although this is also needed.

Core Activities Connection

At this stage in the development of the Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice has created a Five Year Plan and directed the Bahá'ís to focus on building human resources and then to create growth and development. The primary vehicle to accomplish these goals is through globally establishing four neighborhood-based core activities: devotional meetings, study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups led by youth. The planet has been subdivided into clusters to facilitate this spiritualization process. Neighborhood activities are organized and hosted by

both Bahá'ís and people of a variety of faiths (with the Bahá'ís assisting and tracking progress). Assemblies play a key role in encouraging full community participation in the work of the Plan and participating in the Plan themselves.

While marriage education involves detailed subject matter that is not part of study circle courses or other core activities, there is **a synergistic relationship between marriage preparation and strengthening and the core activities**. By implementing the features of the Plan in our individual and collective endeavors, participants contribute to the strength of the Bahá'í Faith on every scale, including the fundamental units of the marriage and family. Regular and systematic study and implementation of features of the Five Year Plan and incorporation of learning shared by the local, regional, national, and international institutions, therefore, is implicitly in the best individual and collective interest of all units of society.

As people participate in the core activities, absorbing and applying the content and learning from the experiences, they strengthen their spiritual lives and improve their ability to apply spiritual principles in all aspects of their lives. Of course, this includes their relationships, marriages, and families. Of particular focus in many core activities is character, the development and knowing of which is an essential prerequisite to a successful marriage. Individual and family transformation can be one outcome of participation in the core activities of the Plan.

Couples who have strong and happy relationships and marriages are also more likely to participate fully and effectively in the life of the community, which of course significantly includes the core activities.

Foundation Statements and Principles

- **Assemblies have a responsibility to educate the community about marriage**
“The Spiritual Assembly should always be concerned that the believers in its community are being deepened in their understanding of the Bahá'í concept of marriage, especially the young people, so that the very thought of divorce will be abhorrent to them.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 390-391)
- **Fostering obedience to the Bahá'í marriage laws is an important duty of Assemblies**
“The carrying out of the Bahá'í marriage laws, as given to the friends throughout the world, is a vital obligation of every believer who wishes to marry, and it is an important duty of every Local Spiritual Assembly to ensure that these laws are known to, and obeyed by, the believers within their jurisdiction, whether or not the Bahá'í marriage ceremony is recognized by civil law. Each Assembly, therefore, must conscientiously carry out its responsibilities in connection with the holding of Bahá'í marriage ceremonies, the recording of Bahá'í marriages in a register kept for this purpose, and the issuing of Bahá'í marriage certificates.” (The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, p. 488-489)
- **Marriage is a foundational element for all human society**
“The Bahá'í teachings...centre on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution.” (*The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 223)
- **Marital and family unity among the Bahá'ís builds credibility for their message to the world; seriously courting a partner and maintaining marriages are part of an individual's and couple's service to God**
“...[I]f the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 222)
- **Marriage preparation is a key element in preserving marriage**
“Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá'í marriage.” (Introduction to *Preserving Bahá'í Marriages* compilation, item 3)
- **Maintain focus on the Plans of the Universal House of Justice, which include a strong emphasis on the core activities and intensive programs of growth as the most vital priorities**
“...[E]nsure that your endeavors are in harmony with and contribute to the activities of the Bahá'í community. What is essential, of course, is that nothing be done to distract the friends from pursuing tasks central to the Five Year Plan.” (Universal House of Justice to the Marriage Transformation Project, June 2, 2005)

- **Strong, happy marriages foster active participation of individuals and couples in core activities and strengthen Assemblies**

“In every part of the world the three participants in the Plan—the individual, the community and the institutions—each playing a distinctive role, are reinforcing one another’s actions. The core activities of study circles, children’s classes and devotional meetings have become essential aspects and mutually enhancing achievements lending greater vigor and success to all the other elements of Bahá’í community life. Human resources are being augmented, and the Local Spiritual Assemblies are responding to the fresh demands of this rising vitality.” (The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 161, 2004)

- **Human resource development through the core activities can provide skills and knowledge that benefit relationships and marriage**

“ [The individual is showing a]...growing sense of initiative and resourcefulness, as well as...courage and audacity.... Qualities such as consecration, zeal, confidence and tenacity attest to the enhanced vitality of their faith....” (The Universal House of Justice, December 27, 2005, para. 2.4) “...[A]bove all, it is reliance on God that sustains them in their endeavors.” (ibid, para. 2.5)

- **Building knowledge and skills with character/virtues supports relationships and marriages as well as all aspects of the core activities, each of which can include a focus on character**

“Bahá’í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 118)

“Bahá’í law places the responsibility for ascertaining knowledge of the character of those entering into the marriage contract on the two parties involved, and on the parents, who must give consent to the marriage.” (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 368)

Creating a Common Understanding About Character

Institutions often provide goals and frameworks for action to members of the Bahá’í community. As they create these, they are conscious of the larger spiritual goal of transforming the hearts, souls, and lives of those they serve. Character transformation is a key part of this focus. Bahá’u’lláh says, “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 259)

As the Bahá’í Writings clearly point to character as a vital focus for courting couples and their parents who must give consent to marriage, Institutions will be assisting the strength of relationships and marriages any time character learning and growth are incorporated into activities. This focus on character must be across the lifespan. Character education begins in a child’s early years, so training for parents in how to foster it is vital. Junior youth, youth, and adults all benefit from character education.

Simply put, **character is:**

- The sum of all the qualities you develop throughout your life as you make choices about how to speak and act
- The spiritual essence of who you are as a human being
- Your moral compass or ethical strength

For individuals, couples, and parents to effectively know one another’s characters and then develop them, it is vital to have some common understanding of what character is, what character qualities are, and how to practice them. One of the goals of the core activities is character transformation. Part of the goal of the Marriage Transformation Project, in consultation with various character experts, is to identify key character qualities that are vital to consider in relationships and marriages, define them, and clarify the behavior that is observable related to them.

One tool to assist this process is:

Use Positive Character Quality Language!
“The light of a good character surpasseth the light of the sun...” Bahá'u'lláh

You can include a character quality to acknowledge others deeply, specifically, and sincerely. This practice encourages character growth, builds relationships, and brings happiness. Enjoy enhancing your communications with easy statements, such as:

- Thank you for being [helpful, flexible, truthful...].
- I appreciate your [courage, respect, faithfulness...].
- I love how [accepting, enthusiastic, encouraging...] you are!

Character Qualities Vital for Relationships/Marriages

Note: When you use these words, you are sharing the Word of God with others.
All except for “assertiveness” appear in the scriptures of the world’s religions.)

Acceptance	Encouragement	Joyfulness	Self-Discipline
Assertiveness	Enthusiasm	Justice	Service
Beauty	Equality	Kindness	Sincerity
Caring	Excellence	Love	Spirituality
Chastity	Faithfulness	Loyalty	Strength
Commitment	Flexibility	Mercy	Tactfulness
Compassion	Forgiveness	Moderation	Thankfulness
Confidence	Friendliness	Patience	Thoughtfulness
Contentment	Generosity	Peacefulness	Trustworthiness
Cooperation	Gentleness	Perseverance	Truthfulness
Courage	Helpfulness	Purity	Unity
Courtesy	Honesty	Purposefulness	Wisdom
Creativity	Humility	Resilience	
Detachment	Idealism	Respect	
Discernment	Integrity	Responsibility	

Note: A similar tool is “The Language of the Virtues”, as encouraged by The Virtues Project (www.virtuesproject.com). Special Ideas has “Ways to Praise” as well (www.bahairesources.com/products.php?id=4572)

The Marriage Transformation Project is publishing materials that include in-depth content on each of these qualities. Here is an example:

Service

Service is acting selflessly or sacrificially to improve the quality of life of others.

I practice Service effectively when I:

- Proactively offer my time, talents, skills, and attention to my partner, friends, family, religion, employer, and community
- Work to complete tasks quietly and humbly, without expecting notice, reward, or appreciation
- Joyfully and willingly put the needs and comforts of others before my own
- Contribute time, resources, and energy to improve the health, happiness, well-being, and prosperity of others
- Assist or encourage people to participate in activities that benefit others; such as, inviting someone to work on a project with me

I need to strengthen Service when I:

- Expect people to wait on me, even when that is not their responsibility
- Stand by while others do what needs to be done, making no effort to participate
- Regard the requests, needs, and problems of others as too much trouble for me to notice or respond to
- Boast about or need to receive attention and praise for what I do for others

I misuse* the strength of Service when I:

- Enable others to act irresponsibly or to become unwisely dependent upon me
- Become so involved in serving others that I neglect important relationships, commitments, and responsibilities

Reflection: ...[S]erve one another in love. ... Love your neighbor as yourself.

~ *The Bible* (New International Version), Galatians 5:13-14

*A misuse occurs when someone practices a quality to excess or in the wrong time or place

Core Activities Connection

Character is perhaps one of the easiest topics connected to relationships and marriage that can easily be incorporated into the core activities. Devotional meetings can have character qualities such as respect, trustworthiness, moderation, friendliness, or compassion as themes. Children's classes will always incorporate character lessons. Study circle courses, especially Ruhi Book 1, *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, also logically include character content, and junior youth groups incorporate character lessons.

In the sequence of Ruhi study circle courses, "Participants are exposed to a body of knowledge that fosters a set of related habits, attitudes, and qualities and are assisted in sharpening certain skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service." (Universal House of Justice, December 27, 2005)

Building Relationships Between Couples and the Assembly

Individuals and couples will freely and easily approach Assemblies when they feel a high level of trust and respect for the functioning of the institution they are considering contacting. Where an Assembly has made the effort to have a loving, interactive relationship with the community it serves, those needing guidance or having difficulties are more likely to contact it on a timely basis.

"[Assemblies] must endeavor to promote amity and concord amongst the friends, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and whole-hearted cooperation for the service of the Cause. ... They must promote by every means in their power the material as well as the spiritual enlightenment of youth, the means for the education of children, institute, whenever possible, Bahá'í educational institutions, organize and supervise their work and provide the best means for their progress and development." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, "The Local Spiritual Assembly", p. 48)

Discussion Question: How can Assemblies build a relationship with community members?

Core Activities Connection

Time management and time availability are always issues for Assemblies. The more systematic the Assembly is able to be with relationship and marriage education, as well as effectively handling issues that arise in relationships and marriages, the more time it will have to devote to the teaching work and to the work of the current Plan from the Universal House of Justice. In addition, couples who handle relationships and marriages in a mature, consultative manner, with the support of the institutions, are more likely to stay involved in the work of the community even when there are difficulties.

Assemblies can build relationships with community members through participating in the core activities themselves. One of the activities associated with the core activities is doing home visits, which can assist Assembly members to also spot opportunities for relationship/marriage education. The more Assembly members know those they are serving and their needs, the more effective their service will be.

The Marriage Transformation Project includes in its goals developing materials that individuals, couples, Assemblies, and members of other institutions can use to create and maintain healthy marriages. It is hoped that these relieve the institutions of a portion of their workload. Some of the projects currently underway are outlined below. We are always open to input that informs us of issues and concerns that we may be able to address with systematic materials or widely available books. We also appreciate the involvement of institutions/members of institutions on review and testing teams for new materials.

Couple Consultation Skills

The common belief amongst professionals in the counseling and marriage education fields is that marital conflict is normal and expected. Couples are simply told to learn to “fight fairly” or “manage conflict” so that it does not destroy the relationship. This viewpoint is a challenging one when held up against Baha’u’llah’s words: “This Wronged One hath forbidden the people of God to engage in contention or conflict and hath exhorted them to righteous deeds and praiseworthy character.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 88)

As Assemblies, you may be in a position to note when communication between couples is in trouble. John M. Gottman, Ph.D. and his team at the Relationship Research Institute in Seattle, Washington, have discovered a number of couple communication indicators that warn of trouble in a marriage (John M. Gottman, Ph.D. and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*). The warning signs are:

1. Starting interactions negatively and harshly
2. Being critical of your partner’s/spouse’s character (character attack)
3. Showing contempt for your partner/spouse (sneering, mocking, being superior)
4. Being defensive with your partner/spouse (a form of blame)
5. Shutting your partner/spouse out and avoiding communication (stonewalling)
6. Experiencing strong physical responses to negativity, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, or sweating (flooding)

Well-developed consultation skills are part of what can help couples avoid these negative patterns. Couples who are skillful at consulting together are equipped to create a marriage without highly destructive conflict. As Assemblies meet with couples prior to marriage, or when they meet with couples experiencing marital difficulties, they may find it useful to provide the couple with some education and training in consultation skills.

Marital consultation differs in some ways from institutional consultation, although of course there are many common principles. Our ability as a Bahá’í community to teach couples how to consult is in its very early stages, just as it can be a struggle for institutions to use this tool effectively.

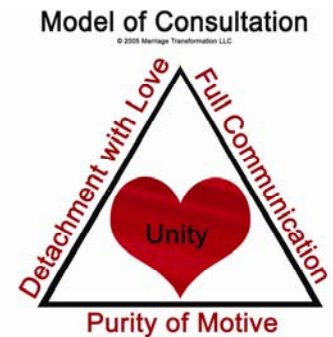
The Marriage Transformation Project book, *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* contains a consultation skills-assessment worksheet, or you can contact Susanne Alexander for a pdf file of it. (Note: The one in *Pure Gold: Encouraging Character Qualities in Marriage* is somewhat out of date.)

Principles that Govern Consultation in Marriage:

Equality and Deference: “Bahá’í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out in response to questions addressed to it that, in a marriage relationship, neither husband nor wife should ever unjustly dominate the other, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other, if agreement cannot be reached through consultation; each couple should determine exactly under what circumstances such deference is to take place.” (On behalf of The Universal House of Justice, 1992, “Violence and Sexual Abuse of Women and Children”)

Spiritual Qualities: (Guidance for Spiritual Assemblies) “The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 87)

Harmony and Unity; Involvement of Others: [When asked about specific rules of conduct to govern the relationship between husbands and wives] “...for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgment they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.” (Universal House of Justice: *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages*, pp. 5-6)



Freedom of Expression: “Consultation has been ordained by Bahá’u’lláh as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined. It is applicable to the marriage partners and within the family, and indeed in all areas where believers participate in mutual decision-making. It requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured and/or their views belittled; these prerequisites for success are unattainable if the fear of violence or abuse are present.” (Universal House of Justice: January 24, 1993)

Detachment: (Guidance for Spiritual Assemblies) “The second principle is that of detachment in consultation. The members of an Assembly must learn to express their views frankly, calmly, without passion or rancor. They must also learn to listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offense or belittling the views of another. Bahá’í consultation is not an easy process. It requires love, kindness, moral courage and humility. Thus no member should ever allow himself to be prevented from expressing frankly his view because it may offend a fellow member; and, realizing this, no member should take offense at another member’s statements.” (Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, pp. 179-180)

Deference; Harmony, Unity, and Obedience to God: “In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other. In short, the relationship between husband and wife should be as held forth in the prayer revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which is often read at Bahá’í weddings: “Verily they are married in obedience to Thy command. Cause them to become the signs of harmony and unity until the end of time.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 225, quoting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Prayers* (US 2002), p. 107)

Within marriage, consultation is often brief, casual, and happens in a wide variety of places and circumstances. However, at times, a couple may have a serious, complex issue to address, and a more formal method may be useful. Here is a potential structure to consider:

A Potential Consultation Method for Significant Issues

(Excerpt from *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, Third Edition, Chapter 21)

At the Beginning of Consultation

1. Pray for the consultation to be effective and the decision to be wise and unified.
2. Identify and state the problem or issue precisely, so that there is a common understanding of the focus of the consultation. Agree on the amount of time you each can spend on the consultation and whether you may need multiple conversations.
3. Identify and agree upon any principles, character qualities, or spiritual guidance that are relevant to the matter.
4. Gather and review any needed facts.

Throughout the Consultation

1. Turn to God by praying and meditating for guidance.
2. Listen carefully to one another without interruptions.
3. Exchange information, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings.
4. Gather any additional facts or guidance as needed.
5. Have a frank and loving discussion that includes and generates many possible solutions, strategies, and plans.
6. Include anyone else who is affected by the decision as appropriate.

Making a Decision

1. Consider ethical, moral, social, and practical aspects of the possible solutions proposed.
2. Evaluate the possible solutions, considering such aspects as finances, the energy need to carry them out, the time available, priorities, and whatever else is important to you.
3. Together come to a unified decision based on the principles you agreed to, the guidance that applies, and all other relevant input.
4. Write down the decision(s), and what is expected of each person involved in carrying it out, and the timing for when actions will occur. Discuss how to encourage one another throughout the effort.
5. Pray together at the conclusion.

Acting to Fulfill the Decision

1. Together carry out the decision(s) wholeheartedly, in unity, trusting in a positive outcome and praying for assistance.
2. Reflect upon and evaluate the decision at agreed-upon stages or when circumstances change.
3. Modify the decision and change direction as needed.
4. Re-assess the outcome.

Marriage Preparation

It may assist Assemblies to have a set of materials available to give to couples who approach them about marrying. These materials could include the following:

- The importance of friendship, chastity, and character knowledge
- The purpose of marriage
- Guidance on obtaining parental consent
- Wedding guidelines, including information about the Bahá'í ceremony, witnesses, legal registration, and ceremonies of other faiths
- The role of the Assembly
- Available resources

➤ **NOTE:** Individuals, couples, or Assemblies willing to participate in creating, reviewing, and testing a set of materials that orient couples to Bahá'í marriage at the time of engagement should contact Susanne Alexander at Marriage Transformation. Any Assembly that currently has such a kit or a list of materials it includes in its kits is also encouraged to share them. The goal is to create a standardized kit available to all Assemblies. One widely available resource for individuals and couples is *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, one of the books published by the Marriage Transformation Project and now in its third edition.

Marriage Counseling

The Bahá'í Writings and institutions encourage troubled couples to seek assistance from their Assemblies. They are also encouraged to seek professional assistance.

“The House of Justice is distressed to learn that you and your husband are continuing to experience marital difficulties. It has frequently advised believers in such situations to turn to the Spiritual Assemblies for advice and counsel, and to follow this advice in their efforts to preserve the unity of their marital relationship. It has

been found useful in many instances to also seek the assistance of competent professional marriage counselors, who can provide useful insights and guidance in the use of constructive measures to bring about a greater degree of unity.”

(On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, p. 459)

However, in most instances, such counselors are not Bahá’ís or familiar with the Bahá’í Writings. Troubled couples may not be thinking clearly and may find it difficult to share appropriate information about the Bahá’í Faith and its teachings on marriage with the counselor. Husbands or wives in a conflicted marriage may also share only such quotations and perspectives that support their own point of view.

The Marriage Transformation Project is working cooperatively with the office of Community Administration and Development at the U.S. Bahá’í National Center in developing a document that individuals and couples seeking marital counseling can share with the counselor. The draft document contains information on:

- Bahá’í views of marriage
- Encouragement for counseling
- Marriage preparation
- Principles that guide healthy marriages
- Marriage and children
- Help for troubled marriages
- Separation and divorce

➤ **NOTE:** Individuals, couples, or Assemblies willing to participate in reviewing and testing this counselor-information document and provide feedback should contact Susanne Alexander at Marriage Transformation.

About Infidelity: One outcome from unstable and unhappy marriages is infidelity, and the Bahá’í community is not immune from this. While there are numerous secular and Christian-based resources available to help couples recover from an affair, there are more limited resources on preventing one. One specialist in prevention is Dr. Willard F. Harley, Jr., www.marriagebuilders.com. Working from a foundation of his work, which focuses on helping couples meet one another’s emotional needs, we are developing a needs-assessment worksheet that includes Bahá’í concepts. Experts are finding that when spouses do not meet each other’s most vital needs, they may even violate their moral beliefs to meet them.

➤ **NOTE:** Contact Susanne Alexander at Marriage Transformation if you wish to review a draft of this worksheet or to participate in developing infidelity prevention and recovery materials.

➤ **NOTE:** Institutions wishing to obtain training for their members or for appointees in the community who could be responsible for meeting with and counseling couples may find the following an excellent resource: www.prepare-enrich.com. Prepare-Enrich training is also excellent for working with couples prior to marriage.

Separation and the Year of Waiting

As Assemblies educate their communities about marriage, it is important for them to counsel couples and the community in general to seek assistance early when experiencing problems rather than waiting for years before asking for help. When couples delay seeking assistance, the problems become entrenched, and the couple may be at the point of separation when they finally contact the Assembly. [Consider: An occasional general reminder at Feast, a notice in a newsletter, a letter to the community, a talk at Feast on the topic...]

Assemblies and couples may struggle with how to handle requests for separation and years of waiting and how to carry them out in ways that facilitate reconciliation and rebuild the relationship and marriage. If reconciliation does not occur, then everyone involved needs to assist the divorce to happen in ways that cause minimum harm to the individuals, children, and communities involved.

“When an application for divorce is made to a Spiritual Assembly its first thought and action should be to reconcile the couple and to ensure that they know the Bahá’í teachings on the matter. God willing, the Assembly will be successful and no year of waiting need be started. However, if the Assembly finds that it is unable to persuade the party concerned to withdraw the application for divorce, it must conclude that, from its point of view, there appears to be an irreconcilable antipathy, and it has no alternative to setting the date for the beginning of the year of waiting. During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their difference, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them. But if the year of waiting comes to an end without reconciliation the Bahá’í divorce must be granted as at the date of the granting of the civil divorce if this has not already taken place.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 391)

A limited selection of secular or Christian-based books and practices exists that aim to assist separations to calm emotions and aid reconciliation or to carry out less destructive divorces. One of the key recommendations in the materials is for the couple, often with the guidance of a counselor or clergy (an Assembly for Bahá’ís), to create a consultative agreement that structures any kind of separation. If a temporary separation becomes a year of waiting, the couple would then create a new agreement. If there is significant conflict between a separating couple or the Assembly grants the beginning of a year of waiting, it is wise for the agreement to be in writing. Agreements could potentially address the following topic areas:

- Type of separation, living arrangements, and sharing of home furnishings (in-house with separate sleeping arrangements, separate residences, psychological, physical, short-term, year of waiting...)
- Start date and length of separation and date for review
- Sharing and caring for children or other dependents
- How each will handle finances
- Keeping the business of the family going (household responsibilities, family outings, family events, holidays...)
- Expectations of spouses (methods and frequency of communications, personal development, constructive actions, dating each other or others, sexual contact with each other, ending an affair, entering of each other’s residences...)
- Counseling together or separately; counseling for children
- Education and skill building initiatives
- Whether to involve legal counsel or mediation and at what stage
- Confidentiality; sharing with family and friends (limiting explanations, discouraging gossip and backbiting, refraining from maligning spouse, discouraging others from taking sides)*

***Reference Materials:**

Taking Space, How to Use Separation to Explore the Future of Your Relationship (Robert J. Buchicchio)

Hope for the Separated, Wounded Marriages Can Be Healed (Gary Chapman)

Should I Stay or Go? How Controlled Separation Can Save Your Marriage (Lee Raffel)

- **NOTE:** Individuals, couples, or Assemblies willing to participate in reviewing and testing separation and year of waiting materials should contact Susanne Alexander at Marriage Transformation. Assemblies currently using any type of separation agreement are encouraged to share details and experiences as well.

Guidelines for Assemblies When Responding to Abuse/Domestic Violence

Refer to “Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence”, compiled and edited by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States (for American Bahá’ís, this is downloadable from the national administrative website, www.usbnc.org). Electronic copies can also be requested from the Marriage Transformation Project.

Case Study Discussions:

Instructions: You are members of a Local Spiritual Assembly. Choose one scenario below and discuss your approach and solutions. Relationships and marriages are complex, and you have limited facts to go on, so make some assumptions as needed to move you through the discussion. The goal is to identify the relationship/marriage education and growth opportunities that will move the couple forward. If you complete one and there is more time, then choose another one. When the groups re-gather, please be prepared to share any key insights from the process (not necessarily your solutions to the couple's problems). Note: If you become stuck for ideas, refer to the following page: "Practical Ways for Institutions to Support Relationships and Marriages".

1. Althea and Tom have decided to marry. Althea is a Bahá'í and Tom is a member of another faith. Tom is in his thirties and strongly objects to asking his parents for consent to marry. Althea's parents are discussing consent but have some concerns about an interfaith marriage. Tom reluctantly agrees to Althea contacting the Assembly for help. What will be the focus of the education you offer? What ways could you deliver it to the couple? To the parents?
2. Peri and Selim have been married 3 years. When they began discussing the possibility of having children, they started questioning whether they were still in love with one another. They were so upset from this discussion that they separated for a few days. They approach a local Assembly, as they are now wondering whether they should initiate a year of waiting. What will be the focus of the education you offer? What ways could you deliver it to the couple? What suggestions could the Assembly make to encourage the couple to explore this issue in new ways and achieve reconciliation?
3. Melissa and Shen have been married 15 years. They have two children ages 11 and 8. They spend a lot of their free time with their children, but do little together as a couple. They often have conflicts over household responsibilities. Their sexual intimacy is infrequent. Melissa has begun to spend her lunch hours with a man from work that she finds very sympathetic and fascinating. He suggests meeting at a motel after work one evening. This suggestion prompts Melissa to realize that she needs to address her unhappiness in her marriage before she takes actions that destroy it. Shen is embarrassed and unwilling to go to the Assembly, but Melissa requests to meet with them herself anyway. What will be the focus of the education you offer? What ways could you deliver it to the wife? Husband? Couple? What suggestions could the Assembly make to encourage the couple to turn their marriage in a new direction?
4. Lena and Gregor have been married for 22 years. The last of their 3 children has just left home for college. As they share the home alone for the first time in 20 years, Lena and Gregor begin to realize that they have lost touch with each other. They are not sure they like the same things any more and are uncertain about continuing with their marriage. As they discuss the possibility of separating, they decide to seek guidance from the Assembly. What will be the focus of the education you offer? What ways could you deliver it to the couple? What guidance can the Assembly share about rekindling their marriage and maintaining it? Why might the marriage still be important for their children?

Note: If you have time, also consider how each of these situations could have been prevented.

Practical Ways for Institutions to Support Relationships and Marriages

Note: Any relationship/marriage education effort can include people of all faiths: as organizers, facilitators, and participants. When doing an activity, look for ways to connect it to the work of the Five Year Plan/Core Activities. Remember the guidance from the Universal House of Justice not to be distracted from the work of the Plan. This means that some of the suggestions below may not be timely for many communities. Whatever marriage education initiatives a community takes or does not engage in at this time, it will be wise for Assemblies to encourage couples and families to include the health of their relationship and families as a priority while being involved in fulfilling the goals of the plans of the Universal House of Justice.

1. Pray for people's marriages and those who want to be married.
2. Encourage couples to pray for their own current or future marriages.
3. Participate in home visits to build relationships with community members.
4. Include pre-marriage education and marriage strengthening in the community's goals.
5. Recruit volunteers to seek marriage educator training; Spiritual Assemblies may choose to subsidize training.
6. Create a relationship/marriage education team for educating the community on establishing and maintaining healthy relationships/marriages. It works best when this function is separate from a counseling committee that works with troubled couples seeking to separate or divorce. However, the Spiritual Assembly may choose to ask the education committee to focus on general areas of concern it sees happening in relationships and marriages.
7. Educate the community about the laws related to marriage and the spiritual and administrative outcome of disobeying the laws.
8. Provide couples with marriage education materials when they request an Assembly officiate their wedding and offer additional guidance as needed or when requested.
9. Encourage couples to seek help promptly when they are experiencing difficulties.
10. Identify as referral options those individuals who offer effective reconciliation-focused marriage counseling to troubled individuals and couples; wherever possible, locate counselors who include an education component in their practices. [www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com is a resource]
11. Set up a mentoring program for happily married couples to mentor engaged and newlywed couples.
12. Encourage parents to participate in parenting skills training that helps them to model an excellent marriage for their children; offer such training to the community.
13. Educate and assist parents in effectively handling the parental consent process.
14. Sponsor, organize, or participate in ongoing study sessions in the community about relationships and marriage.
15. Sponsor and organize marriage preparation workshops regularly or assist people to participate in them in other locations.
16. Sponsor or organize marriage-strengthening workshops regularly or assist people to participate in them in other locations.
17. Sponsor or organize facilitated marriage retreats of a variety of lengths for married couples.
18. Offer character (virtues) training for all ages; incorporate character (virtues) education in all core activities for all ages; children's classes can contain a character component, devotional meetings can focus on character qualities as themes, junior youth groups can incorporate character education, and study circles include character qualities naturally in their content.
19. Sponsor or organize couples' support and education groups.
20. Encourage couples to serve the community together as a couple.
21. Help couples in maintaining a balance between service and time together to develop their relationship or to sustain their marriage. Help them to understand that establishing a solid relationship or maintaining their marriage is one way they serve God, Bahá'u'lláh, and the community.
22. Assist those married to people who are not Bahá'ís to limit their service as appropriate in order to spend time with their families. Build relationships with their spouses as much as possible.
23. Offer childcare to a couple so that they can spend marriage-strengthening time together.
24. Set up study sessions using the Universal House of Justice compilations, "A Chaste and Holy Life" and "Preserving Bahá'í Marriages."
25. Have the readings and prayers during the spiritual portion of a 19-Day Feast relate to marriage.
26. Consult at the 19-Day Feast and at unit conventions about actions to take to support marriage preparation and marriages.

27. Have a book report/review at the 19-Day Feast social portion about a marriage-related book that is approved for distribution at Bahá'í activities.
28. Hold a devotional meeting about marriage.
29. Hold an annual marriage celebration party.
30. Include relationship and marriage education in community newsletters or Bahá'í publications for children, youth, and adults.
31. Track and recognize the wedding anniversaries of community members.
32. Determine the community statistics for marriage and divorce, and set goals and create action plans to improve marriage retention. Research and track the improvement process.
33. Be sensitive and wise about assigning unrelated people to work together on community tasks or committees who are in troubled marriages so that the service does not result in an inappropriate relationship or infidelity.
34. Hold relationship workshops on campuses sponsored by Bahá'í Campus Clubs.
35. Hold sessions at regional and permanent Bahá'í schools on the topic of relationships and marriage.
36. Hold sessions for junior youth that assist them to prepare for relationships and marriage.
37. Hold sessions at youth and young adult conferences on the topics of relationships and marriage.
38. Set up Year of Service opportunities that support marriage preparation and marriage education.
39. Encourage skilled and knowledgeable community members to prepare and present research papers on marriage at Association of Bahá'í Studies conferences.
40. Encourage talented and knowledgeable community members to develop the arts in support of marriage (Examples: music, stories, poetry, painting, drama...).
41. Set up an interfaith marriage education initiative.
42. Request local libraries and bookstores to carry books on marriage preparation and marriage.
43. Recommend books on relationships and marriage for Book Club discussions at bookstores or in homes.
44. Participate in Marriage Week USA, which occurs annually in the United States from February 7-14, or begin something similar in your community or country.

Note: A general marriage education resource is www.smartmarriages.com.

Thank you for your courteous and enthusiastic participation!

About the Marriage Transformation Project

The Marriage Transformation Project is a Bahá'í-inspired global social and economic development project committed to marriage education and marriage skill building for people at all stages of relationships. A key focus of the project is developing materials that assist people before marriage to know one another's characters and encourage couples after marriage to continue developing their character qualities. Materials to assist parents with developing children's characters are also available and under development.

In addition to its own independent work in developing materials, Marriage Transformation draws on the work of marriage researchers and experts. It also derives part of its inspiration and content from the teachings of the world's religions, especially as they relate to character qualities. These include the following faiths: Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim.

Project Founders: Susanne Alexander, President, is working full time on this project without salary, with an occasional paid contractor who assists with the website, newsletter, and book layout. She creates most of the books and materials that the project publishes, often with coauthors. Her husband, Craig Farnsworth, serves part-time as Secretary-Treasurer, with the primary responsibility of managing the finances and business affairs of the company and the distribution of books. Both Susanne and Craig are trained relationship/marriage coaches with a specialty in character. They facilitate workshops and offer relationship coaching together.

Project Purpose: Empowering people to create happy, lasting, character-based marriages—the foundation of a prosperous, unified world.

Mission Possible for Transforming Marriages: We are committed to creating practical resources and powerful learning opportunities focused on character to support successful marriage preparation, and to sustain and balance the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects of married life.

Project Funding: The income for the project comes primarily from book and product sales, with a small amount from workshops. At times, committed individuals (primarily family members) have made contributions to the principals of the project to support the high costs of book creation and publishing and the necessary overhead expenses of running a home office and book distribution center. In March 2004, the project was set up as a corporation, so financial contributions cannot be made under U.S. Internal Revenue Service laws to Marriage Transformation, only to the principals of the company as individuals, who can then transfer and use the money for company purposes (contact Susanne Alexander, President, susanne@marriagetransformation.com). Those providing financial assistance to the company do not become shareholders or principals of the company and cannot direct the company's actions. We are committed to use all funds in support of the company purpose and mission, and we appreciate people's commitment to participating financially.

We encourage you to stay in touch with the Marriage Transformation Project:

We offer a free monthly e-newsletter, and you can sign up for it on the home page of our website, www.marriagetransformation.com, or on the slip of paper provided. The website also has many great resource recommendations and products for sale in our online store. We also welcome volunteers for all of our materials/books editing teams.

We are happy to work with anyone on supplying materials for your needs, and we provide discounts for purchases of books for groups/resale. We are also happy to work with anyone wishing to use our materials or modify them for a particular couple, group, purpose, or grant application.

Loving regards,
Susanne Alexander and Craig Farnsworth
Marriage Transformation Project