Marital Virtues: A Manna for Distressed Couples

Sakshi Jain
Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, The IIS University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India
Roopa Mathur
Professor, Department of Psychology, The IIS University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

Marital distress is growing rapidly due to a change in the lifestyle and is emerging as a serious area of concern for the society. In this respect marital virtues can be helpful in reducing many of the differences that arise in married life. Virtues such as friendship, generosity, loyalty and fairness are important for a happy married life. The focus has now shifted from distress to that of dealing with dissimilarities in marriage in a positive way. Having a pragmatic outlook, inculcating moral and righteous characteristics and having knowledge to cope with dissimilarities are important in a healthy marriage. These constitute main beliefs of a couple who shows willingness to remain forever in wedlock. For wedded couples it presents a "relationship check up". The present paper tries to explore the construct of marital virtues and its effectiveness in establishing long term and satisfactory marriages.

Key Words: Marriage, Marital virtues, Marital distress, Marital satisfaction, Marital problems.

Introduction: Marriage is an important institution and a sacred bond between husband and wife. It brings happiness, peace to the couple and leads to development of strong family relationships. However, if there are problems in marital adjustment it may lead to marital distress. Though everyone who is married may experience distress at some point in marriage, in acute cases the trouble reaches a point where partners become profoundly disappointed and upset about their marriage. When married couples face misery and agony to such an extent that the alliance is seriously threatened, such a condition is known as marital distress. This is a very disconcerting human problem. Jacobson & Christensen (1996) defined marital distress as, "situations in which partners experience communication and problem solving difficulties, find it difficult to work together, and have difficulty accepting each other's differences." There are three sets of factors that predict marital distress: Premarital factors (for example personality, values), social and environmental factors, and interpersonal relationship factors. Among these, interpersonal relationships are the largest set of factors that predict marital distress. Snyder et al. (2005) argued that the majority of issues contributing to marital distress can be categorized within one of the six domains: Cognitive, Affective, Behavioural, Communication, Structural and Socio-ecological.

It is seen that contented couples and couples who are unhappy and distraught elucidate and describe their spouse's activities in different ways (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990)**.** Couples who have blissful marriages tend to augment their association with valued acknowledgements. The actions by the companion are always taken in an affirmative manner (Holzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985).

Studies show that around 80-94% of the precision of premarital and early marital factors tell the marriage will be favourable or not.

According to the Behavioural theories of marriage, such as social learning theory or the Enduring Dynamics Model, couples enter marriage with individual differences which are regular, do not vary and in due course lead to conflicts (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Thus, partners either demonstrate incompatible conflict or an augmentation in such patterns eventually. Research shows that those marriages whose time span is 2 to 4 years showed either negative or positive conflict behaviours were steady over time (Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985).

Studies also show close association between marital distress and marital problems. Lots of people go through marital distress and experience devastating disputes and conflicts annually. The data confirm that marital distress and disintegration of the family is linked to a wide range of consequences for the grown-ups and kids including problems pertaining to psychological wellbeing, individual adjustment, child conduct, physical condition and financial accomplishment (Booth & Amato, 2001; Halford & Bouma, 1997). Snyder et al. (2005) reported that higher rates of marital dissatisfaction were correlated with higher levels of extramarital affairs, separation and divorce. Distressed couples talk less about behaviours that are positive and satisfying. They remain aloof and disinterested as compared to non-distressed couples. This kind of behavior is seen in spoken as well as nonverbal between partners (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1991).

John Gottman (1994) proposed a theory of behavioural patterns. According to this theory marital conflict hampers the quality of the relationship which can be predicted when partners show negative behavioural patterns. Gottman called these negative behavioural patterns the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* .These are:

a) Criticism- Complaints are a way to show displeasure and condemnation. It may show an individual aggression. But when complaints are such that they cause depreciation of the relationship, it is particularly upsetting to the receiver (Leary et al. 1998).

b) Contempt- Contempt is a total disregard for the spouse, which may be seen in the form of mockery or sneering. A partner may spurn the spouse and ridicule him/her. It is the most dangerous of the four horsemen of Gottman.

c) Defensiveness- Defensiveness is seen in incompatible couples. Each tries to defend his own happiness and wellbeing. Defensiveness is increased when one partner is at the receiving end of disregard by the other person. Protecting reactions include making justifications for unpleasant activities, and giving answers to problems with counter problems.

d) Stonewalling-It is the withdrawal of one partner psychologically, emotionally and physically from the other. That one person turns into a stone wall, refusing to interact and communicate.

The relationship between husband and wife depends upon the individual qualities, strength of character and the integrity of the partners. Therefore marriage can aptly be called a school of virtues. Fowers (1998, 2000, 2001) applied the concept of virtues and it was implemented by Hawkins, Blanchard, Fawcett, and Jenkins (2007). Developing virtues requires a composite life that is based on knowledge and feelings. According to Fowers (2005) virtues are conceptualized as "the form of excellence that allows an individual to pursue worthwhile ends in everyday activities and the pursuit of what is good".

Various researches show that there are certain factors that distinguish the marriages that turn out well from those that do not. There are dissimilarities in every marriage but the way these are managed makes all the difference. The ability to identify and communicate emotions plays an important role in the maintenance of marital satisfaction. Factors such as being good friends, spending time alone, sharing responsibilities and keeping faith in each other makes for a good relationship. So the role of marital virtues is very important. Recently the concept of marital virtues has shifted from contention and disharmony to that of positive attitude and an affirmative way of thinking. The new concept has stressed on the driving force and inspiration for togetherness among couples. According to Fowers (2000), "the best way to have a good marriage is to be a good person." Couple should posses the marital virtues of friendship, generosity, fairness and loyalty for a satisfying marriage**.** These attributes can be evolved and worked upon by the individuals concerned if one wants to live meaningfully with ones soul mate.

Marital Virtue of Friendship: In a marriage a spouse can be the best friend. Friendship in marriage has been defined by various scholars. Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, described friendship in his book *Nicomachean Ethics as* a friendship which matures and is reinforced with time. The partners try to support and boost one another. They maintain high standards and ethics. Their way of life and thinking is pure and idealist and they are constantly in quest of a shared objective. The individuals try to adjust, amend and transform themselves along the way of life. The alliance remains steady and unwavering with time. Fowers theory is based on the Aristotelian concept of friendship. Character friendship as put forth by Fowers (2005) has three features i.e. a common steadfastness to search for things and ideas that are commendable and admirable by the character friends, an ability to identify and access the best things in each other so that they together want what is proficient and noble, a common aim has to be attained and for this the virtuous friends put in the efforts together.

When partners attain purity of thought it further enhances their disposition towards a more satisfying and friendly marital relations. Character friendship disposes spouses toward teamwork and is concerned with their happiness (Fowers, 2000).Communication is favourable for a good alliance as it helps to create a friendly environment between spouses and deal with odds collectively rather than as dealing with a problem like rivals. A friendly way of communication is recognized as "turning toward" and "repair attempts" (Gottman, 1999; Gottman et al., 1998).

Marital Virtue of Generosity: The Science of Generosity Inititiave (2009) defines generosity as, "the virtue of giving good things to one's spouse freely and abundantly" and helps to foster and cherish the quality and uprightness of the marital relationship. If the spouses see each other's qualities, the marriage is a happy one (Fowers, Lyons, & Monteal, 1996). Spouses who conform with their mates, partners who are ready to forfeit and forego their wishes for the sake of the relationship**,** partners who feel accepted and cherished in the alliance, and whose endeavours are always appreciated and remembered (Gable, 2003) have a healthy and deep relationship. For husbands and wives generosity was positively associated with marital satisfaction and negatively associated with marital conflict and perceived divorce likelihood. Gottman & Silver (1999) state that, "Generous behavior on the part of one spouse is likely to lead the other spouse to report higher marital quality. Being on the receiving end of small favours, expressions of affection and respect, and forgiveness is likely to increase feelings of personal worth, connection with one's spouse, and happiness in the relationship." Similarly McCullough, Kimeldorf et al. (2008) opine that, "Generous acts are likely to engender a sense of gratitude in the receiving spouse. Gratitude, in turn, is linked to positive emotions, such as happiness." This in turn helps in reducing marital distress in couples.

Marital Virtue of Loyalty: In any marriage, even though the couples may be happy, sometimes there may be trouble and anguish (Gottman and Silver, 1999). But if the relationship is a healthy one, the commitment towards each other can maintain and nourish the alliance (Brickman 1987; Johnson 1999). Weak and fragile foundation can never carry a relationship far enough. Virtue such as loyalty is important if the relationship is to survive (Fowers, 2000). A very strong and highly energetic force that compels the partners to remain with each other is loyalty. The relationship is secure because of this virtue and all events and measures are linked to this distinct quality. Loyalty and dedication is based on commitment for togetherness and sharing. Young partners often desire to get aged with one another. Loyalty in conversation is also necessary. Being compassionate and listening to the companion with thorough concentration, makes the partner feel that he or she is the most important person in other's life. The commitment to the partner for loyalty is the strongest tie. Being always truthful to the mate in context of a common past and a hopeful future makes the relationship even more secure and binding.

Marital Virtue of Fairness: The marriage and the family are managed in the greatest possible way by working on fairness by the couple. The individuals play a role in the wedlock in various ways and with different vigour. Here there is an unquestioning belief that the partner is performing the duties to the best of one's capacity. In a marriage splitting the responsibility of work into reasonable sections may be equity, but a better strategy would be to perform it together. When the couple thinks of a common purpose or target, the pair also discusses and charts out a plan to make it come into action. Coordinating work as a mixed endeavour in a character marriage will make the marriage more blissful.

Conclusion: A successful marriage requires constant working in the form of personal qualities and character strength. It not only affects all aspects of life, but also leads to building of healthy relationships. Marital virtues form the base for the partners. Though there are conflicts and differences between couples but for a happy marriage it is needed that the partners make an effort continuously towards inculcating marital virtues to decrease marital distress.

References:

1. Booth, A., & Amato, P.R. (2001). Parental predivorce relations and offspring postdivorce well-being. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 63(1), 197–212.
2. Bradbury, T.N., & Fincham, F.D. (1990). Attributions in marriage: Review and critique. *Psychological Bullentin, 107*, 3-33.
3. Brickman, P. (1987). Commitment. In C. Wortman and R. Sorrentino, (Eds), *Commitment, conflict, and caring*. (pp.1-18). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
4. Caughlin, J.P., Huston, T.L., & Houts, R.M. (2000). How does personality matter in marriage? An examination of trait anxiety, interpersonal negativity, and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 326-336.
5. Fowers, B.J., Lyons, E.M., & Monteal, K.H. (1996). Positive marital illusions: Self-enhancement or relationship enhancement? *Journal of Family Psychology, 2*, 192-208.
6. Fowers, B.J. (1998). Psychology and the good marriage. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *41*, 516-541.
7. Fowers, B.J. (2000). *Beyond the myth of marital happiness*: *How embracing the virtues of loyalty, generosity, justice, and courage can strengthen your relationship*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey –Bass.

8. Fowers, B.J. (2001). The limits of a technical concept of a good marriage: Exploring the role of virtue in communication skills. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 27*, 327-340.

9. Fowers, B.J. (2005). *Virtue and Psychology: Pursuing excellence in ordinary practices*. Washington, D.C: APA Press.

10. Gable, S. (2003). *Accentuating the positives: Supportive responses to expressions of positive events.* Presented at the International Positive Psychology Summit, Washington, DC.

11. Gottman, J. M. (1994). *What Predicts Divorce? The Relationship between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

12. Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R.W. (1999). How stable is marital interaction over time? *Family Process, 38,* 159-165.

13. Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

14. Halford, W.K., & Bouma, R. (1997). Individual psychopathology and marital distress. In K.Halford , & H.J Markman., (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of marriage and couples intervention*. (pp. 291–321). New York , John Wiley and Sons.

15. Hawkins, A.J., Blanchard, V. L., Fawcett, E.B., & Jenkins, J. (2007). *Is marriage and relationship education effective?* Paper presented at the Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference, May 30, 2007, Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/metaanalysis_07.pdf

16. Holtzworth-Munroe,A., & Jacobson, N.S. (1991). Behavioral marital therapy. In A.S. Gurman & D.P. Kniskern (Eds.), *Handbook of family therapy* (Vol. II. pp. 96-132). New York:Brunner/Mazel.

17. Huston, T.L., Caughlin, J.P., Houts, R.M., Smith, S., George, L.J. (2001). The connubical crucible: Newlywed years as predictors of marital delight, distress and divorce. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80*, 237-252.

18. Jacobson, N.S., & Christensen, A. (1996). *Integrative couple therapy: Promoting acceptance and change.* New York: Norton.

19. Johnson, M.P. (1999). Personal, moral, and structural commitment to relationships: Experiences of choice and constraint. In J.M. Adams and W.H. Jones, (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal commitment and relationship stability.* (pp.73-87). New York: Kluwer Academic.

20. Kelly, C., Huston, T.L., & Cate, R.M. (1985). Premarital relationship correlates of the erosion of satisfaction in marriage. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 2*, 167-178.

21. Leary, M. R., Springer, C., Negel, L., Ansell, E., & Evans, K. (1998). The Causes, Phenomenology, and Consequences of Hurt Feelings. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*, 1225–1237.

22. McCullough, M.E., Kimeldorf, M.B., & Cohen, A.D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism? The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in*

23. *Psychological Science, 17*, 281–285.

24. Science of Generosity Initiative. (2009). What is generosity? Retrieved from

25. http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/more-about-the-initiative/what-is-generosity/

26. Snyder, D.K., Heyman, R.E., & Haynes, S.N. (2005). Evidence-based approaches to assessing couples. *Psychological Assessment, 17*(3), 288-307. doi: 10.1037/1040-3590.17.3.288.