



Closer in Quarantine: A Study of Successful Marriage in Social Isolation

MENAHAL BEGAWALA
OSMAN UMARJI

YAQVEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Menahal Begawala is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor who is inspired by her clients as they heal, grow, and develop resilience through adversity. Menahal is passionate about bringing about awareness of mental, emotional, and physical wellness through an Islamic lens to the community through lectures and workshops. Menahal has received marriage counseling training through the Gottman Institute and authored the Islamic Reference Guide for the Gottman Method. She has also pursued a specialization in treatment of trauma. Currently, Menahal has a private practice in New York for counseling individuals, couples, and families. Her current pursuit of knowledge is in the field of integrative nutrition so that she can continue to work on treating the whole person in her work both with individuals and with the community.

Dr. Osman Umarji is the Director of Survey Research and Evaluation at Yaqeen. He holds a Bachelor's of Science in Electrical Engineering and a Master's and Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from UC Irvine. He studied Islam at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. His research interests include the development of motivation, religious socialization, spirituality, and Islamic legal theory. Dr. Umarji is also an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education at UC Irvine. He teaches child development, adolescent development, and statistics. His expertise in both psychological and Islamic sciences allows him to conduct empirical research on contemporary issues facing Muslims.

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We are living in unprecedented times with stressors that span social isolation to job uncertainty and everything in between. During this time, there may be added pressure on marriages. Issues that may have been previously dormant within marriages can rise to the surface. While difficult, if approached correctly, the current situation can present an opportunity to make a positive shift that is likely overdue.

All relationships require intentional and active effort to thrive. If a marriage has been neglected, the consequences will hit harder now than at times when we could have escaped or distracted ourselves from the painful experience of disconnect from our spouses. The ways to improve a marriage during social isolation will be similar to what is prescribed to couples during more typical times. However, as the areas of stress become more visible and feel more acute, the remedies may also need to be amplified.

Oftentimes, seemingly complex issues can be remedied by going back to the basics. The verse in the Qur'an that is printed on almost all wedding invitations reminds us of the core components of a thriving marriage:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And of His signs is that He created for you, from yourselves, spouses so that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you love and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for people who reflect.¹

There are three components of marriage that are referenced in this verse that give us a comprehensive framework upon which marriages are built and can also be rebuilt: *sakīnah* (tranquility), *mawaddah* (love), and *rahmah* (mercy).

***Sakīnah* (tranquility)**

Allah describes the primary purpose of the union of a husband and wife as finding peace, contentment, and tranquility in one another. *Sakan* implies that the hearts of

¹ Qur'an 30:21.

the couple turn toward one another.² The term *sakan* also connotes a sense of stillness and being in a place of safety and refuge. Our relational capacity as humans requires trust and safety within a marriage in order to connect through curiosity and receptivity toward one another. In other words, safety is a prerequisite to developing intimacy and tranquility. From the foremost of human needs is the need for safety, including physical and psychological safety.³ At a time when our physical safety may feel threatened due to the coronavirus, it is even more important that we find safety in our spouses and those closest to us. Just as we are rushing to figure out how to strengthen our physical immunity, we need to be just as—if not more—intentional about ensuring the immunity of our relationships against the stressors of this time. When safety is truly established, love and belonging can blossom.

***Mawaddah* (love)**

Often translated as love, the term *mawaddah* goes beyond the initial stages of dopamine-filled passion that is often present in the early stages of a marriage. Allah has created us to connect to Him and to others, and *mawaddah* is the love between spouses that meets this innate need. As spouses grow together in marriage, they will learn about the many things that they do not see eye to eye on. The beautiful part of mature love in healthy relationships is that it can be offered, received, and experienced despite spouses not being on the same page about every single thing. Research on more than 700 couples over time has found that 69% of marital conflicts cannot be completely resolved.⁴ This is the natural result of marriage being the union of two different people with different histories. *Mawaddah* is the love that connects a couple with all their individual differences.

² Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥf al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1971).

³ Joseph E. Gawel, “Herzberg’s Theory of Motivation and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation* 5, no. 1 (1996): 11.

⁴ John Mordechai Gottman, “Gottman Method Couple Therapy,” *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy* 4, no. 8 (2008): 138–64.

***Rahmah* (mercy)**

Often translated as mercy, *rahmah* is both a natural byproduct of, and a contributor to, both of the previously mentioned characteristics of a healthy marriage. This encompasses the ability to show grace, empathy, and compassion. It is something that should be visited and revisited frequently within a marriage, especially when external stressors increase and may cause either or both partners an inability to show up at their best in the relationship.

Love and mercy are necessary ingredients to achieve tranquility and satisfaction in marriage. Love and mercy are multifaceted and include many actions including being helpful, supportive, and creating a safe environment where spouses can speak openly with each other. Another dimension of love is gratitude. Appreciating one's spouse is a central component of healthy marriages and should be practiced regularly. Couples who regularly express gratitude report more satisfaction in their marriages.⁵

Attaching to Allah to attach to our spouses

Having a secure attachment style is important in maintaining a healthy relationship with one's spouse. A secure attachment requires maintaining proximity with the attachment figure, seeing the attachment figure as a secure base for exploration, considering the attachment figure as providing a haven of safety, and experiencing separation anxiety when separated from the attachment figure.⁶ Research on attachment theory has found that our relationship with God may also be described as an attachment bond. Our perception of Allah may be influenced by how we attached to our parents or our attachment to Him may compensate for a deficient bond with our parents.⁷ Regardless, the importance of developing a secure attachment with Allah may be important in how we connect to our spouses.

⁵ Cameron L. Gordon, Robyn A. M. Arnette, and Rachel E. Smith, "Have You Thanked Your Spouse Today? Felt and Expressed Gratitude among Married Couples," *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 3 (2011): 339–43.

⁶ Gordon, Arnette, and Smith.

⁷ Richard Beck and Angie McDonald, "Attachment to God: The Attachment to God Inventory, Tests of Working Model Correspondence, and an Exploration of Faith Group Differences," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 2 (2004): 92–103.

Establishing a secure relationship with Allah can provide an internal sense of stability and resilience in the face of hardship. Additionally, it can impact how we relate to our spouses. For example, the more we connect to Allah and understand His attributes of being Loving (*al-Wadūd*), Merciful (*al-Raḥīm*), Forgiving (*al-Ghaḥūr*), and Appreciative (*al-Shakūr*), the more we can then manifest those beautiful attributes in interactions with our spouse. Thus, from an Islamic perspective, working on creating a secure and intimate relationship with Allah may be an important part of creating a secure and intimate relationship with our spouse.

A study of Muslim marriages

The Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research surveyed 169 Muslims about the quality of their marriages.⁸ We asked about overall marital satisfaction and how their relationship had changed over the past month (since people have been socially isolated at home all day). We wanted to understand the correlates of successful marriages and the specific factors that related to improved marriages during social isolation. The sample was 74% female, 72% were college graduates, and 69% were between the ages of 25 and 44. The sample was 14% White, 5% Black, 49% South Asian, and 22% Arab. We addressed the following two research questions:

1. To what extent are family cohesion and expressiveness, relationship with Allah, and gratitude received from one's spouse related to marital satisfaction?
2. To what extent are the number of children at home, reading Qur'an, gratitude from one's spouse, and seeing blessings during social isolation related to changes in relationship quality during social isolation?

Measures

We asked respondents numerous questions about their religiosity, marriage, and demographic information. See Appendix A for the survey questions. Family

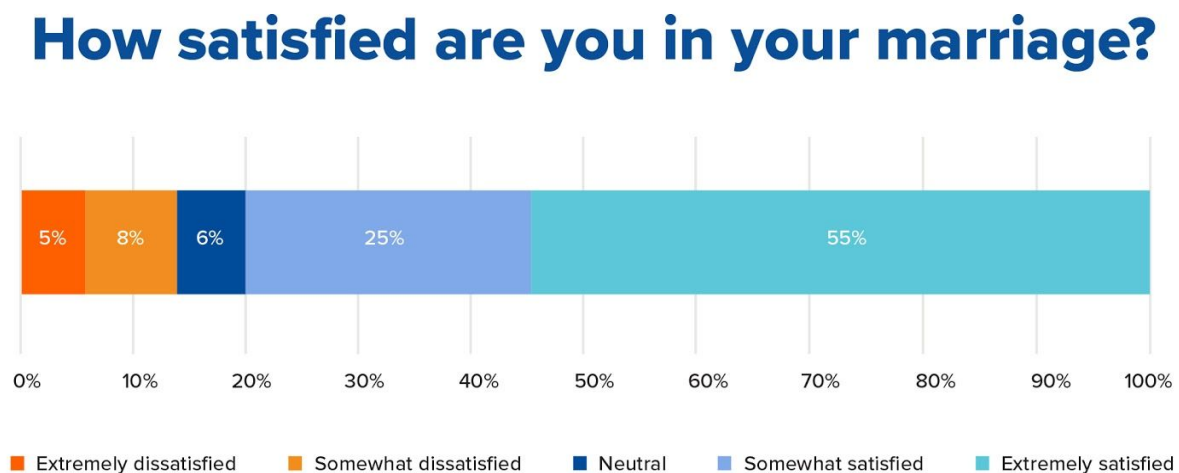
⁸ The survey was administered between April 16 and April 26, 2020. The survey was about attitudes and behaviors pertaining to social isolation and Ramadan. Of the 605 total respondents, this study utilized a subsample of married respondents. Respondents primarily came from North America and Britain, but the survey included participants from all over the world.

cohesion and expressiveness were measured using a scale of four items.⁹ All other constructs were assessed by single items.

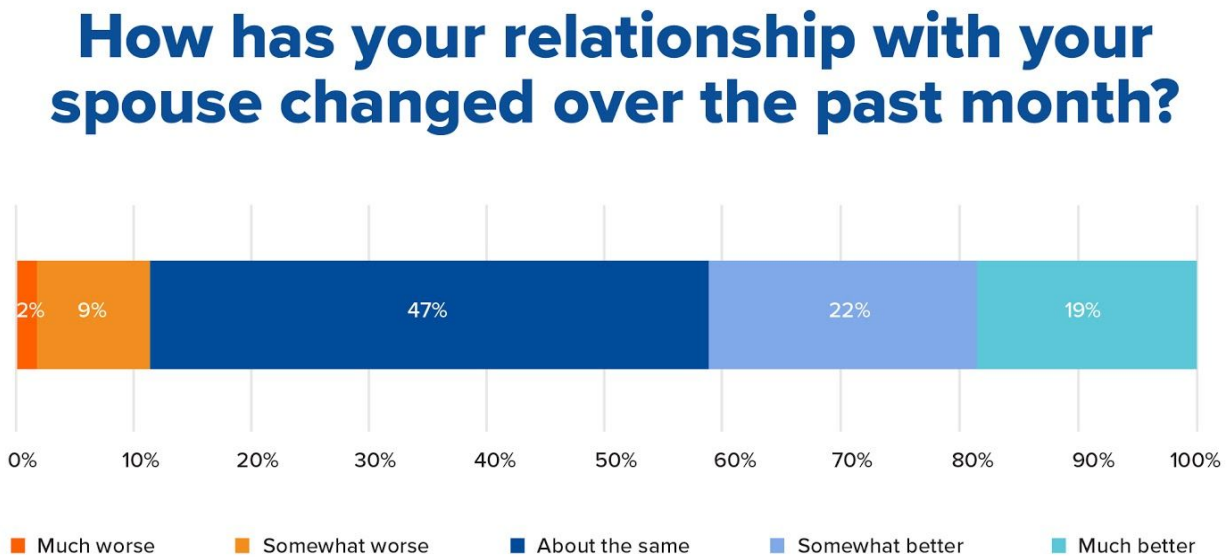
Results

The sample generally reported being satisfied with their marriages. Less than 20% reported being neutral or dissatisfied, whereas 25% reported being somewhat satisfied, and 55% reported being extremely satisfied. As for changes in relationship quality over the past month, 47% reported that their relationship was about the same, 11% reported that it got worse, and 41% reported that it improved.

FIGURE 1. MARITAL SATISFACTION



⁹ Two items measured family cohesion, and two items measured family expressiveness. Cronbach's alpha was .89 for the aggregated scale.

FIGURE 2. CHANGES IN MARITAL QUALITY OVER THE PAST MONTH

To answer our first research question, we ran a logistic regression to understand the factors that differentiated extremely satisfactory marriages from all others.¹⁰ An increase in family cohesion and expressiveness increased the odds of having an extremely satisfying marriage by 50%. An increase in considering one's relationship with Allah to be intimate increased the odds by 51%. An increase in how often one's spouse expressed thanks increased the odds by 45%. Age and education did not relate to marital satisfaction.

To answer our second research question, we used multiple linear regression to understand the factors related to relationship changes over the past month (e.g., during social isolation).¹¹ Reading the Qur'an daily ($B=.21$), the frequency of receiving thanks ($B=.27$), and seeing more blessings since the spread of the coronavirus ($B=.15$) were predictors of better relationship quality over the last 30

¹⁰ Logistic regression is a statistical method that attempts to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between one dichotomous outcome variable (extremely satisfied in marriage or not) and a series of other predictor variables.

¹¹ Multiple linear regression is a statistical method that attempts to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between one continuous outcome variable (change in relationship quality from much worse to much better) and a series of other predictor variables.

days.¹² Age, education, and number of children did not predict relationship changes. See Appendix A, Table 3, and Table 4 for the detailed results of the models.

Odds of Reporting Extremely Satisfied with Marriage

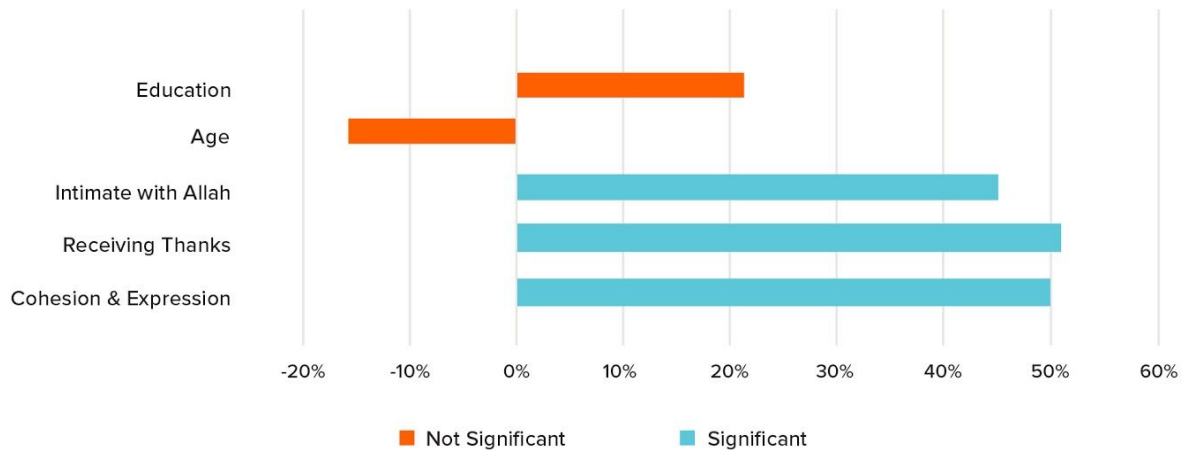
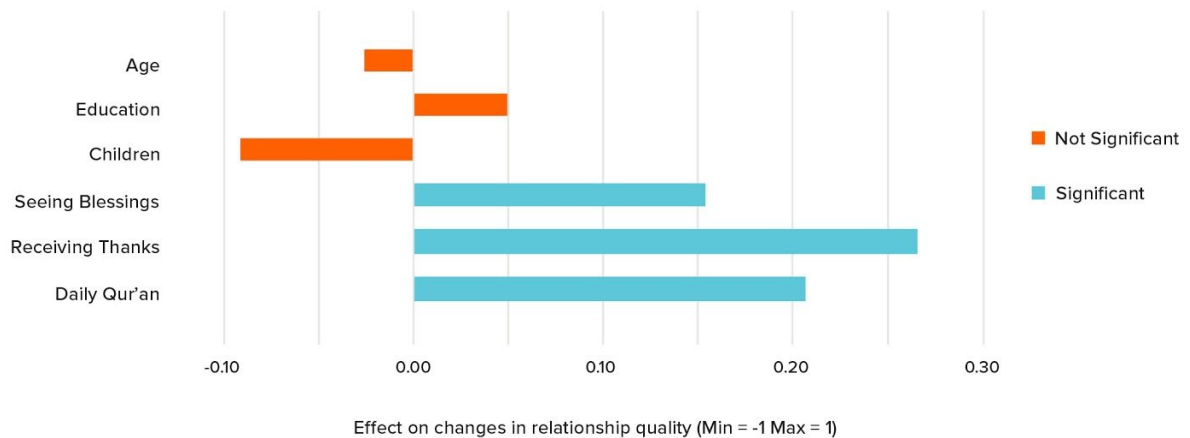


Figure 3.

¹²A more technical explanation is that reading the Qur'an daily was associated with a fifth of a standard deviation increase in relationship quality, whereas a standard deviation increase in receiving thanks was associated with more than a fourth of a standard deviation increase in relationship quality.

Figure 4.

Predictors of Changes in Relationship Quality



Discussion

This study surveyed 169 Muslims to investigate the correlates of marital satisfaction and improvements in marriage during social isolation. Although marriages are susceptible to being shaken when major life stressors arise, they can also grow and thrive during times of difficulty with the proper mindset and behaviors.

Our findings reinforce the Qur'anic prescriptions of safety, love, and mercy as requirements for tranquil and peaceful marriages. In the context of our study, acts of love included feeling appreciated by one's spouse and reporting one's family as helping and supportive. Safety and mercy were manifested in the facilitation of open communication that allowed for discussing personal problems. Allowing one's spouse the opportunity to express whatever concerns are in their heart is part of empathy and compassion. The other component of successful marriages that our study highlighted was the importance of having a strong attachment to Allah. People who reported reading the Qur'an daily reported improvements in their marriage during social isolation and those who reported having an intimate

relationship with Allah were more likely to have extremely satisfying marriages. Additionally, the ability to see blessings during difficult times, which has been found to be correlated with reading the Qur'an more often,¹³ was related to improvements in marriage during social isolation. Thus, maintaining a close relationship with Allah appears to be a central ingredient in perceiving one's marriage as successful.

Based on our findings and current research on marriage, we suggest the following practices to enrich an already healthy relationship or to rebuild a troubled relationship due to heightened stress or feelings of disconnection.

Know yourself

Each one of us comes into marriage with an attachment style, a way of relating that is grounded in our upbringing. When we are under stress, it is likely that we will default to our old ways of coping. For some, this might mean intuitively pulling away and distancing from others. Those who are more anxious may be more sensitive to their spouse's availability and may be prone to feeling abandoned. Individuals who have a secure attachment will likely engage in more problem-solving behaviors when under stress.

Irrespective of attachment style, as we near our threshold for stress, we need to engage in introspection and be aware of how we relate to those closest to us during this time. We have to be aware of when we go from being calm and capable of communication to reactive and agitated or shutting down. This switch can happen within a fraction of a second and impacts our perception of our spouse as well as our ability to properly take in information. Being mindful and aware of when and how one may switch from a calm to angry state is important in preventing further problems. Furthermore, having a repertoire of self-regulation strategies that one can go to when on the verge of losing their cool is vital. Self-regulation strategies can include, but are not limited to:

¹³ Osman Umarji and Hassan Elwan, "Embracing Uncertainty: How to Feel Emotionally Stable in a Pandemic," *Yaqeen*, March 30, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/embracing-uncertainty-how-to-feel-emotionally-stable-in-a-pandemic/>.

1. Deep breathing and mindfulness practices¹⁴
2. Progressive muscle relaxation
3. Exercise
4. Looking at nature
5. A hands-on activity that produces something, such as knitting or gardening.

Have a conversation to understand each other's needs.

Each one of us has a particular way in which we handle stress. What works for you may not work for your spouse. For example, you might seek connection and want to engage in conversation when you experience stress, whereas your spouse may dive into work mode and avoid the conversations that you are desperately looking to have. Discuss current life events and pay attention to how this pandemic is impacting each of you differently, while recognizing that both of you are coping with difficult changes and may be feeling unsettled. Come to the conversation with curiosity, openness, and a desire to understand your spouse. The attitude with which you approach the conversation will determine the level of safety that is felt by your spouse. Questions that spouses can ask each other during these conversations include:

1. How can I support you during this time?
2. How can we manage this reality together?
3. What routines and expectations can we establish that will allow both of our needs to be met?
4. How much alone time does each of us need?

If your goal is to work on your marriage, you'll have to spend some time learning how to calm the storm that makes effective communication and intimacy difficult. You'll have to take a deeper look at your own baseline of anxiety, whether that means attending to older wounds or understanding the part of yourself that yearns for connection and fears its loss. When we can move into a space of mindfulness

¹⁴ Justin Parrott, "How to Be a Mindful Muslim," *Yaqeen*, November 21, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/how-to-be-a-mindful-muslim-an-exercise-in-islamic-meditation/>.

and curiosity (both towards ourselves as well as our partners), it turns on the parts of our brain that allow for rational thinking and intimate contact.

The two steps above are meant to create a sense of safety, love, and mercy within the relationship. They will require diligence and a willingness to shift our mindset and behaviors. How you feel about your partner will manifest not in what you say but how you say it. Most of our communication lies in the body-to-body connection. What is going on beyond the words? The tone of voice, the facial expression, the tension in the throat, the furrowed brow, or the glazed look in the eyes might be enough of a trigger to switch you or your spouse from being receptive to reactive.

If you can become more aware of these nonverbal behaviors, both in your display of them as well as how you're impacted by your spouse's nonverbal communication, you become more capable of naming and regulating them. This will allow for more intimate contact and receptivity within the relationship that can lead to growth. There's more to a marriage than knowing your problems and working through them. With the increased time that spouses are spending together, the question to ask is: How can we each give to, and receive nourishment from, one another? When the Prophet ﷺ described his relationship with his wife Khadījah رضي الله عنها, he said, "I was nourished by her love."¹⁵ This statement demonstrates just how fulfilling a healthy marriage can be. Here are some ways to nurture that love.

Infuse the relationship with gratitude. Lots of it.

Whoever does not thank people has not thanked Allah.¹⁶

As simple as this sounds, many couples who are struggling in their marriages will find that expressing gratitude to each other is rare to nonexistent. It may be especially difficult to show gratitude if resentment has been building over time. Try to begin and end each day by looking for things to thank your spouse for. Keep count and try to thank your spouse for at least ten things each day. Even if they are

¹⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2435.

¹⁶ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4811.

small, mundane things that you feel they “should” be doing, expressing appreciation can never hurt. Appreciation makes a person feel genuinely seen and acknowledged. As we shift from our fast-paced lifestyles and are forced to slow down, take the opportunity to pay more attention to what your partner is doing right.

Schedule times for connection

If you are juggling work, children, and household responsibilities, your marriage may default to being last on the list. That’s all the more reason to intentionally fulfill its rights upon you. The Prophet ﷺ is known to have visited each of his wives on a schedule despite his role as prophet, leader, friend, to name a few. He would block off times after ‘*Aṣr* and after ‘*Ishā*’ prayer to spend quality time with them.¹⁷ Regardless of how busy he was, he not only set aside specific times to visit them but was astute in recognizing how they were doing emotionally. It’s easy to get overwhelmed with all that’s happening. To ensure that your relationship doesn’t get lost in the process, sit together and decide when and how you’ll make time for connection. Doing so will allow each of you to set appropriate expectations.

Some things to schedule include:

1. Intimacy.
2. A “date” in whatever way is available to you in the current circumstances, whether it's having a cup of tea together, working on a project together, or sharing a meal.
3. Conversations: Perhaps the larger more difficult conversations can be set aside for now, and time and space can be made for conversations that will contribute to growth.

Topics of conversation can include:

- A. Your pasts: As mentioned previously, our personal history becomes more relevant in times of stress. Be mindful of your assumptions and default

¹⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5268.

responses so that you can approach a conversation with curiosity. Look at how your past may impact your current choices. How have past struggles shaped how each of you navigates crisis situations? How did your family of origin respond to difficulties?

- B. Your patterns: Couples often get stuck in negative patterns that prevent them from being able to connect.¹⁸ Check in with your partner if the pattern that you both engage in entails blaming, criticizing, pushing away, or withdrawing. If you're able to sit down and look at the exchange of words and emotions that typically takes place (without engaging in criticism or blaming), you will be able to notice the repetitive nature of the arguments and intentionally choose to stop the pattern when it arises in the future.
- C. Your vision for the future: Where would you like to see your relationship once this time has passed? What is your vision for your emotional, financial, and spiritual future? How do you hope to develop more resilience as a couple? Look at the difficulties that you have already successfully gotten through and pinpoint the strengths that made that possible.
- D. What you're currently stressed about (outside of your relationship): Research has found that "the stress-reducing conversation" is the defining part of relationships that are resilient and thrive against the odds.¹⁹ This practice includes each partner listening to his/her spouse with genuine interest, empathizing with his/her emotions, and steering clear of unsolicited advice. Once the first person finishes sharing whatever is on his/her mind, the roles are reversed and the speaker then becomes the listener.

Rahmah is an essential component in all of these conversations. During these stressful times, it's likely that most of us won't be showing up at our best in our relationships, especially if there has already been strain in the marriage leading up to this. Recognize that you and your spouse are both doing the best that you can. Be aware of speaking to your spouse in ways that will further chip away at him/her and therefore at your marriage. Dr. Gottman outlines what he terms as "The Four

¹⁸ Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

¹⁹ John Mordechai Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Harmony Books, 2015).

Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” which his research has shown are frequently present in relationships that do not last. These are:

- Criticism: Putting down your partner’s character rather than confining your feedback to a particular behavior (“You are lazy” vs. “I wish you would have taken out the garbage”).
- Defensiveness: Playing the victim or blaming your partner rather than acknowledging your partner’s upset and taking some responsibility for it.
- Contempt: Approaching your partner in a belittling and demeaning manner from a position of superiority. This can show up as sarcasm, mocking, eye-rolling, or name-calling.
- Stonewalling: Tuning out so that it appears not only as a disconnect but a lack of caring altogether.

These behaviors undoubtedly hurt the recipient but, over time, cause the relationship to deteriorate. When the relationship becomes riddled with these horsemen, safety is inevitably lost. Abū Mūsá al-Ash‘arī (may Allah be pleased with him) reported: I asked the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, “Who is the most excellent among the Muslims?” He said, “One from whose tongue and hands the other Muslims are secure.”²⁰

Building an attachment to Allah

During the Prophet’s marriage sermon, he would recite the verses in the Qur’an about having *taqwá* (God-consciousness). Thus, he established the importance of God-consciousness in a marriage. There are many ways to build an intimate relationship with Allah, which our study has shown is related to marital satisfaction. The first step is to have the proper God-image, which means to see Allah how He describes Himself. He describes Himself as Near, Loving, Forgiving, Kind, and Merciful. If you feel that Allah dislikes you or has abandoned

²⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* no. 10; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 42.

you, this is likely due to internal turmoil.²¹ Three practices to build a stronger secure attachment with Allah include the following:

- Reading the Qur'an - Regularly reading the Qur'an in a language you understand is essential in getting closer to Allah. It is through the Qur'an that Allah has elaborated His majestic names and attributes. Additionally, through repeated engagement with the Qur'an, one is able to see Allah's wisdom in the different events that occur in life and connect them to one's own lived experiences.
- Having an intimate conversation with Allah (*munājāh*) - In addition to regularly making *du'ā'* and seeking forgiveness, having an intimate conversation with Allah about your life builds a personal bond with Allah. Take your concerns, fears, and joys to Allah and discuss them with Him. Allow yourself to be vulnerable with Allah to get closer and more intimate with Him.
- *Ṣalāh* - Prayer is the consistent connection that keeps Allah near to our hearts. In addition to the five daily prayers, meeting Allah for additional *sunnah* prayers continues to strengthen our attachment to Him.

Conclusion

Marriage is meant to be an institution of safety and refuge. Tranquility in a marriage is meant to be nurtured over time and protects it from the elements. Each partner has the responsibility to show up as their best self within the marriage, which can only happen with self-awareness. Although we may be currently experiencing a completely new challenge, couples have an opportunity to build their refuge intentionally. Turning towards each other and going back to the basics of safety, love, and mercy may enable partners to embrace one another and find the peace and tranquility that Allah has intended in our marriages.

²¹ Najwa Awad and Sarah Sultan, "Why Does Allah Hate Me? Rescripting Negative Self-Talk," *Yaqeen*, September 5, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/najwa-awad/why-does-allah-hate-me-rescripting-negative-self-talk/#.XXFFXZNKhhE>.

Appendix A

Survey Questions used in the analysis

Family Cohesion and Expressiveness [Not at all true (1) to very true (5)]

- In our family there is a feeling of togetherness.
- In our family we really help and support each other.
- In our family we can talk openly in our home.
- In our family we sometimes tell each other about our personal problems.

How satisfied are you in your marriage? [Extremely dissatisfied (1) to Extremely satisfied (5)]

How has your relationship with your spouse changed over the past month? [much worse (1) to much better (5)]

How often does your spouse thank you? [rarely (1) to many times a day (5)]

How many children live with you?

How intimate is your relationship with Allah? [not at all intimate (1) to very intimate (5)]

How many blessings do you see since the Coronavirus spread? [none at all (1) to a great deal (5)]

TABLE 1.

Descriptive Statistics	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Marriage Satisfaction	4.17	1.18	1	5
Change in relationship	3.47	0.96	1	5
Number of Children	1.64	1.34	1	4
Family Cohesion and Expressiveness	8.11	1.91	2.5	10
Daily Qur'an	0.47	0.5	0	1
Intimate with Allah	3.6	0.97	1	5
Spouse is grateful	3.22	1.34	1	5

TABLE 2.**Correlation**

	Marr Satisf	Marr Change	Numb of Child	Coh & Exp	Qur'an	Intimate w Allah	Grateful spouse	Educ
Marr Satisf	1							
Marr Change	0.37***	1						
Numb of Child	-0.08	-0.11	1					
Coh & Exp	0.51***	0.26***	0.04	1				
Qur'an	0.21***	0.24**	0.17*	0.15*	1			
Intimate w	0.20*	0.22**	0.10	0.26***	0.32***	1		
Grateful spouse	0.28***	0.31***	-0.23	0.40***	-0.06	0.23**	1	
Educ	0.15	0.08	-0.05	0.01	-0.15	-0.07	0.18*	1

Note. *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

TABLE 3.

Logistic Regression Predicting Extremely Satisfying Marriage

	Log Odds	SE	p-value
Family cohesion and expressiveness	1.50***	(.17)	0.000
Intimate with Allah	1.52*	(.31)	0.042
Receiving thanks	1.45*	(.22)	0.017
Age	0.84	(.17)	0.387
Education	1.21	(.23)	0.316

Note: SE = standard error. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

TABLE 4.

Regression Results Predicting Changes in Relationship Quality

	B	t-value
Daily Qur'an reading	0.21**	-2.73
Receiving thanks	0.27***	-3.45
Seeing Blessings	0.15*	-2.03
Education	0.05	0.68
Age	-0.68	-0.09
Number of children	-0.03	0.28
r ²	0.19	

Note: All coefficients are standardized. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001