

CONFERENCE REPORTS

The Muslim Marriage Rejuvenation Retreat: Putting *Ihsān* Back into Muslim Marriages

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Our Story

The idea of *The Muslim Marriage Rejuvenation Retreat* was born out of the multiple divorces we were witnessing within our family and the communities we served. We were often privy to the intimate details and found that no significant efforts were being made to proactively preserve and work through the couple's marital difficulties. *Maybe* they attended a couple of therapy sessions or participated in a family intervention. But it often appeared that these interventions were half-hearted attempts toward reconciliation with poor follow-up and ignoring deeper-seated issues. Some marriages seemed to be passing through a slow withering of the spouses' initial love for one another, whereas in others communication seemed to have been poor from day one.

We were often asked to intervene, but, more often than not, it was after one or both of the spouses had already checked out emotionally. The request to intervene was often stated informally – someone sharing their marital difficulties after we had delivered a lecture, brief discussions over the phone, and the like. In essence, these were far from ideal formats to help couples work through their marital difficulties.

We recognize that marriages do not just suddenly end due to some acute issue; rather, quite often a gradual degeneration of communication, love, and tenderness unfolds over many years. Because of this complexity, we have always advised marital therapy and hesitated to devise quick-fix, rapid-solution methods – even though we were often asked to do so. We gradually came to realize that many couples hesitate to engage in therapy, have tried it but found it ineffective, that the therapist's style only appealed to one of the spouses, or they only wanted to engage with the religious leadership despite often needing more than just religious counseling.

To avoid the attached stigma, we determined that a proactive, psycho-educational approach rooted in Islam would be most appropriate in addressing this widespread reality. Alhamdulillah, the Muslim community contains many proficient therapists who work with Muslim couples on an individual basis. However, very few organized efforts are tailored to teach couples the appropriate skills, tools, and best marital practices in a group setting. We wanted to work with couples at all phases of their marriage – from those who do not

need therapy and are just generally interested in improving their marriage to those who have more severe issues.

Our Method

Rather than reinvent the wheel, we decided to explore the existing programs and curriculums. After examining several options, we settled on deepening our understanding of the Gottman Method due to the highly reputable standing that Dr. John Gottman and his seminal work, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Harmony: 2015), hold in the therapeutic community. His book and principles are derived from decades of research on married couples and understanding human behavior within the construct of marriage.

Essentially, he and his team studied the daily mundane, minute interactions between husband and wife to see what does and does not contribute to a successful marriage. Deducing the qualities of the *Masters* and the *Disasters* of marriage, as they refer to them, they clearly identified the most destructive communication styles, developed very clear indicators of impending divorce, and identified best practices within the realm of conflict. They concluded that marriages based on deep friendship are most likely to survive.

We traveled to Seattle – Gottman headquarters – to receive training in how to teach this material to others. To our pleasant surprise, the more we engaged with the material, the more we discovered the Gottman Method’s tremendous overlap with core Islamic understandings about marriage. Upon further reflection, it stands to reason that this research-based methodology, which focuses on best relationship practices, aligns with Islamic perspectives because Islam provides the optimal way of life in *all* realms of life. The etiquettes, mannerisms, and mode of engagement that Islam promotes between husband and wife is the idyllic standard. Dr. Gottman “discovered” these optimal patterns of conduct through his extensive study of marital couples and developed his seven principles accordingly. Thus, for us, integrating Islamic marriage ideals into the *Seven Principles* proved to be a very seamless endeavor.

Allah says, “And We have placed between you (spouses) love and mercy” (Qur’ān 30:21). Thus, we understand that love and mercy are the quintessential ingredients for a healthy, thriving marriage. Love is, of course, premised on the deep attachment, intimacy, and wholesome interdependence that husband and wife share with one another. Mercy, in the context of marriage, essentially translates to good treatment, mutual respect, and civil management of conflict. We discovered that *Seven Principles* is fundamentally a model that focuses on healthy iterations of love and mercy.

The first three principles focus on strengthening the bond of love between husband and wife:

- 1) Enhance Your Love Maps (love your spouse with your head),
- 2) Nurture Fondness and Admiration (love your spouse with your heart), and
- 3) Turning Towards.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth principles focus on increasing mercy between husband and wife:

- 4) Accept Influence,
- 5) Solve Your Solvable Problems, and
- 6) Overcome Gridlock.

Alhamdulillah, we have merged core Islamic concepts derived from the Qur’ān and Sunnah into the *Seven Principles* in a way that Muslim audiences greatly appreciate.

Our Format

To date, we have conducted nine weekend and two week-long retreats ranging in size from 6 to 28 couples, with the first retreat being held during the summer of 2021. We have devised two distinct formats for *The Muslim Marriage Rejuvenation Retreat* – *getaway retreats* and *local retreats*. Getaway retreats are kept more intimate so that a more personal bond may be formed between the instructors and attendees. Local retreats are more economical so as to provide access to a larger number of people. Getaway retreats include food, lodging, activities, and immersion in nature, while local retreats focus strictly on the educational material. In 2023, for the first time, we organized week-long retreats: including a trip to Barbados and a cruise to Alaska.

Recognizing that only a novel approach would make the experience of sharing the *Seven Principles* material optimally beneficial, we incorporated our love of nature as a core element in our retreats. We determined that in order to give our full energy to the attendees, the retreats needed to be just as rejuvenating for us as a couple as they are for the couples we work with. Our energy as husband and wife carries into every aspect of the retreat and, therefore, we need to be fully charged to engage in this demanding, yet very rewarding, work.

Holding these retreats in nature helps open up hearts and facilitates connection. Although the retreats can be very emotionally taxing, the natural settings promote healing and connection. To be surrounded by Allah’s creation (e.g., the sound of wind, the chirping of birds, and the crashing of waves), all of which is engaged in His remembrance – “There is not a thing in existence except that it celebrates His praise” (Qur’ān 17:44) – has proven to be an incredible bonding agent for couples. The serenity that the heart feels in such settings imparts calmness, an especially important facilitator when we encourage couples to navigate through their marital conflicts.

All of our sessions are conducted with each couple sitting at their own table for the duration of the retreat. All exercises are carried out between husband and wife, as the focus is on *their* relationship. Privacy, as it relates to specific marital challenges, is maintained throughout the retreat. No one is asked to share anything that they feel uncomfortable about sharing. A balance of group engagement with private deliberation makes the retreat highly effective in its pedagogical approach. Each couple works on its own challenges and difficulties with the tools they are given. We, as the facilitators, even refrain from circulating around the room while couples engage in the exercises so as to give them privacy. Brief lectures, extensive questionnaires, role playing, couples and group exercises and debriefs, and religious reminders after daily prayers are all part of the dynamic instructional method.

After holding several getaway retreats in natural settings, many of our attendees encouraged us to develop a local version to make this event more affordable and accessible to others. Hence, we started holding retreats during conferences and at masjids.

Our Findings

Alhamdulillah, since embarking upon this journey in 2021, we have worked with 140 married couples. We have discovered the following:

- Newlywed couples appreciate that the material has helped them establish a strong foundation from their marriage's inception.
- Couples married for 15-30 years have remarked that they have unlocked deeper personal understandings that have, in turn, positively impacted their marriage.
- Couples have noted that they can troubleshoot and pinpoint problematic aspects of their marriage in a manner that provides hope and that they now have practical tools to work on specific pressure points.
- Couples have commented that seeing a live married couple in front of them (us as facilitators) has helped them understand and implement the material. Many appreciated the role-playing designed to show how and how not to interact and engage with one another.
- Many couples have said that they do not need therapy but appreciate the idea of rejuvenating their marriage to overcome any stagnation.
- Many couples allow their relationship to stagnate without trying to strengthen their marriage. This is due, in part, to the fact that no viable resources exist or that the stigma attached to seeking help prevents them from doing so. Thus, framing our approach as a retreat is more appealing to such couples.
- Muslim couples often hesitate to seek counseling since, among other reasons, they do not feel that the services are culturally relevant and/or Islamically informed.
- Generally speaking, men are more hesitant and often resistant to seeking help. We therefore make conscious efforts to address their hesitation in our marketing strategies.

Our Hopes

According to the American Psychological Association, 40-50% of first-time marriages end in divorce (Miller 2013, 42). The divorce rate for second marriages is higher, at 60-67% (Petrelli Previtera, LLC., n.d). Our hope is to put a dent in these numbers. The challenges that families of faith face in the modern world are too numerous to count and we, as Muslims, simply cannot afford to allow marital relationships to deteriorate due to poor communication skills and other issues that could have otherwise been easily remedied. Basic relationship dynamics need to be understood and mastered to ensure stability in the home. Through our retreats, we aspire to give couples the skills required for successful marriages and, consequently, creating and maintaining healthy families.

We have seen how our retreats have transformed many couples' relationships. Many of them have told us that this was the most effective step they have ever taken to address their marital challenges.¹

In addition to the general Muslim population, we hope that community and religious leaders, in particular, will become more proactive in seeking help for their own marriages. We recognize the additional intrinsic challenges to marriages in which one or

¹ See <https://www.signsofthedivine.com/testimonials/>.

both spouses hold leadership positions. The negative ramifications of a failed marriage in such marriages tend to have negative repercussions for their communities. Alhamdulillah, Muslim leaders have attended our retreats and testified to the need for, and the viability of, such efforts to enhance the quality of marriages.

Just as premarital counseling has started to become a normalized and promoted reality in the Muslim community, we hope that continuing marital education will gain a similar level of acceptance. Lastly, we hope that communities will invest more resources into preserving existing marriages which is, ultimately, an investment in our families and communities as a whole.

References

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