
Muslim American Families: A Social Worker's Reflections

P. Aneesah Nadir, MSW, PhD*

Marriage Educator and Coach, Before the Nikah Institute

Abstract

Muslim families are diverse culturally, in their practice of Islam, and in the challenges they face. They often experience spiritual, social, mental health, and behavioral health concerns. Among them are those whose members are impacted by the problems of childhood traumas, intergenerational communication problems, and marital problems; caring for children and adults with special needs and aging members; and those confronted by mental illness, suicide, domestic abuse, substance use disorder, incarceration, poverty, racism, and Islamophobia. Even as families strive to be healthy in terms of functioning, their struggles are real. Being Muslim does not totally shield one from these and other trials and tests.

As a Muslim, social worker, and active community member, I have had a front row seat to the successes and challenges facing these families. I have observed aspects of the community's growth and development over the past 45 years. In this article, I share my reflections.

Keywords: Muslim, Islam, family, mental health, Islamophobia, racism, social work

Introduction

From the time I became a social worker in 1978, I have witnessed many of the successes and challenges facing Muslim American families as the community has grown. I have worked as a hospital social worker, a Family Advocacy Outreach worker for Airforce families, a clinical social worker with at-risk teenaged girls, a substance abuse prevention specialist, a therapist in private practice, and a social work professor at a top research university. I have also volunteered as my community's social worker and have witnessed a wide range of families at their best and at their most fractured times. I cannot say that a lot has changed over the 45 years of my career, but I can say that various incremental improvements have been good for the families that implemented them. However, we still need large-scale societal shifts to address all of these challenges.

Muslim families are not monolithic; rather, they are diverse both culturally (e.g., Black Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, White Americans as well those

* Dr. Aneesah Nadir is a pioneer in the field of Muslim mental health and a cofounder of the 25-year-old Islamic Social Services Association. As a retired social work professor and social worker for over four decades, she continues her commitment to growing healthy marriages, families, and communities. Dr. Nadir is the founder of the Before the Nikah Institute and author of the book *Before the Nikah: Proven Principles to Help Single Muslims Choose Wisely and Build Strong Marriages*.

from different parts of Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East) and in their practice of Islam. Some are headed by converts, while others were born and raised in Muslim families. Some families are new arrivals (e.g., immigrants and refugees), others have lived in the U.S. for many generations, and some are the descendants of enslaved Africans. Some families are united in their understanding and practice of Islam, while others within the same family have very different views. They are nuclear two-parent, single-parent, extended, and multigenerational families. Many are strong, healthy, loving, supportive, compassionate, patient, faithful, and committed to Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him) and to providing protective factors for their family.

Muslim families also experience spiritual, social, mental health, and behavioral health concerns. Among them are those whose members are impacted by the problems of childhood traumas, intergenerational communication problems, and marital problems; caring for children and adults with special needs; and aging members and those confronted by mental illness, suicide, domestic abuse, substance use disorder, incarceration, poverty, racism, and Islamophobia. Even as families strive to be healthy in terms of functioning, their struggles are real. Being Muslim does not totally shield one from these and other trials and tests. As a Muslim, social worker, and active community member, I have had a front row seat to the successes and challenges facing these families. I have observed aspects of the community's growth and development over the past almost 45 years. In this article, I share my reflections.

My Story: How I Became Interested in Promoting Healthy Families

I grew up in a family that was loving and supportive, while at the same time fraught with challenges and hardships. Annually, there are about 850,000 divorces nationwide, impacting over 1 million American children (Killawi et al. 2014). I am one of the many children whose parents divorced after separating and reconciling several times, which led to us moving around a lot. As a child of the late 1960s, I grew up believing I was the only one whose parents had divorced. There was a lot of civil unrest, not to mention many family issues at home.

I believe that the economic and racial injustices during the 1960s also had an impact on our family problems. I later learned that while our family had its difficulties, American society and community lacked the educational and support programs, as well as services, that would have given my parents and our family a fighting chance. My parents loved us, but they had various challenges and lacked the relationship skills needed to foster a healthy marriage. Their problems had a direct impact on us and on the work I would later do, for as time passed I would become passionate about finding ways to protect children and strengthen families.

From the very beginning of my undergraduate education, my focus was on addressing social injustice while exploring ways to improve family life and work toward safe, healthy families and communities. My journey led me to a career in social work clinical practice with a focus on children, youth, and families, as well as social policy and community practice. I believed some family problems could be prevented and that individual and community change was possible. I wanted to stand firmly for justice and work for positive change. I wondered how we could support the growth of healthy families,

prevent the problems and challenges families face, intervene when things go wrong, and how to help the community nurture healthy individuals and families.

My undergraduate studies coincided with my conversion to Islam, which occurred the same year I chose to focus on an undergraduate degree in social work. My undergraduate and graduate social work programs provided insight into the challenges my own parents faced in their marital relationship, as well as how their challenges impacted us children. I learned that I was not the only child whose parents had divorced. In fact, as the divorce rate was increasing in the United States, many children nationwide, regardless of race, religion or culture, were living in divorced families.

As I studied social work and Islam, I learned about the keys needed for a healthy family and, in particular, a healthy Muslim family. I found that *taqwa* (God-consciousness) is at the core of a healthy Muslim marriage and family. Love and compassion are the glue that leads to peace and tranquility. The examples we see in Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) marriage and family life are particularly important for so many Muslims who did not grow up with healthy examples of family relationships. Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) family exemplified the compassion, love, patience, and reliance on Allah needed to strengthen a marriage and build a strong family.

Family Problems and Challenges

As I began working in the field, I recognized the myriad of real-life issues families face. Even couples who worked their hardest and put their best efforts forward were challenged by a lack of relationship-building and problem-solving skills and faced with systemic societal challenges that hindered their ability to raise healthy families.

Family problems among Muslims are similar to those experienced by non-Muslim families. However, they often differ in terms of cultural or religious views and practice as well as Islamophobia and racism. Communication problems, financial challenges, substance use disorder, and mental illness are common regardless of religion. Additionally, family problems are impacted by societal issues, socioeconomic injustice, ways families interface with society, and how family members relate to each other. Families nationwide experience a variety of social issues, and Muslim families are not immune to them. As the U.S. Muslim community has grown, so have the problems its families are experiencing.

Intergenerational Challenges

Intergenerational challenges can cause conflicts in families. Children of immigrant parents often feel divided between their parents' home cultures and their experience of growing up as Muslim Americans. Youth whose parents convert when they are pre-teens and teens often experience conflict between how they were raised as American Christians, for example, and their new way of life as American Muslims. Youth often experience the tug and pull between a Muslim American lifestyle and popular culture celebrating Halloween, Christmas, and other traditional American holidays. Parents who are new converts are learning about Islamic holidays, etiquette, traditions, and ways to convey them to their children, all of which are new to them. Youth are also engaging in a lifestyle different from that of their peers and extended family members, and therefore often experience the

additional pressure of not fitting in. Parents are struggling to raise their children in a society they are new to as immigrants and refugees, and in a faith they are new to as converts.

As a youth group leader, I found it was important for young people to socialize with other Muslim youth and discuss the issues and challenges they faced as often the only or one of a few Muslims in school. Youth groups provided a place for social skills and leadership development, as well as to feel empowered as Muslims and provide support for Muslim families trying to raise healthy Muslim youth.

Mental Illness, Suicide, and Substance Use Disorder

Over the years there has been increased recognition that Muslims' mental health needs deserve attention and consideration by our community as well as by the larger society. Poor mental health has a negative impact on the individual, their family members, and the community. Twenty-five years ago, Muslim community leaders lacked this awareness; because of the limited data and the attached stigma, its prevalence was largely ignored or even denied. Data from clinical samples and research studies are helping to raise awareness that Muslim Americans experience anxiety and depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, mood disorders, obsessive compulsive and psychotic disorders, and substance use disorder just like all other communities (Aftab and Khandai 2018). These mental health concerns impact the individual and family's overall wellness as they try to obtain care and treatment.

In their 2012 paper "Anxiety and depression in a post-September 11 sample of Arabs in the USA," published in *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* (Amer and Hovey 2012), Mona Amer, PhD, and Joseph D. Hovey, PhD

examined anxiety and depression rates among more than 600 adult Arab-Americans in 35 states. Most of the study participants were Muslims. Half of the study participants had depression serious enough to warrant further assessment. A quarter reported moderate to severe anxiety. Those rates are higher than those of the general public and other minority groups, says Amer, citing ongoing racial profiling, discrimination and other stressors unique to Arabs as causes. (Clay 2011)

According to a study published in 2021, Muslim Americans were two times more likely to have attempted suicide than individuals from other religious groups: it reported that almost 8% of Muslims in the survey had attempted suicide, versus 6% of Catholics, 5% of Protestants, and 3.6% of Jewish individuals in the study (Awaad et al. 2021).

In addition to mental health challenges, substance use disorder is also impacting families. Methamphetamines, fentanyl, and oxycodone are just some of the drugs in society being used by Muslims. Even though Islam forbids drug use, illicit drug use (24.6%) and alcohol consumption (46.2%) have become increasingly prevalent among Muslim students (Ahmed et al. 2014). Along with poor physical and mental health outcomes, substance use disorder also leads to loss of employment, financial insecurity, poor family relationships, domestic abuse, incarceration, and more. The problems facing people of other faiths are also happening to Muslims.

Muslim-sensitive recovery programs are limited nationally. As the issue is becoming more prevalent, we need many more such programs. Millati Islami, a Twelve-Step recovery program based on Islamic principles and modified from the traditional Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, was founded in 1989 at the Baltimore Masjid by Zaid Imani and has expanded in some areas.¹ Most recently, Tabari Zahir, a social worker in California, has started a virtual support group for Muslims challenged with substance abuse and addiction through his Lamps of Light program. Affordable residential facilities that are sensitive to Islamic traditions and the diverse Muslim American community's unique context and that give patients a year or more to work on their recovery process and issues with their family are needed nationwide. God willing, less stigma, as well as more focus and funding, will become available.

Alhamdulillah, Muslim involvement in addressing these issues is being raised to the national level. The increased connection between Muslim leaders, advocates in the field, and the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Faith Based Services, is helping shine the light on the needs and facilitate programs that will make a difference.

Our Aging Seniors

While the Muslim community is among the country's most youthful communities, its members are aging (Mohamed and Smith 2017). Like other communities, middle-aged Muslims are sandwiched between their children and their aging parents. The past 40 years have seen a focus on establishing mosques, schools, and Islamic educational opportunities. As the community ages, it becomes increasingly important to attend to our senior community members' needs as well. I am part of the Baby Boomer generation. My peers and I are in or close to retirement. Most of my friends have grandchildren and great grandchildren. Our children are sandwiched between us, their aging parents, and their own children who are finishing high school, starting college, and entering the world of work.

While many of my friends are doing their best to stay active and engaged in the community, health concerns and doctor appointments are a regular part of our lives. Our regular conversations include what Medicare covers, managing home repairs, an empty nest as adult children leave home and return, as well as grief over the loss of a spouse or dear friends. Among our very real concerns are loneliness; more comfort with driving shorter distances, daytime rather than nighttime driving, and whether we should even be driving at all; and money worries as we try to manage the costs of medicines, home repairs, and other expenses on social security and retirement income – if we are among the fortunate ones.

Financial Challenges and Housing Insecurity

Money problems are among the major family challenges. Over the years I have witnessed low-income Muslims of indigenous, refugee, and immigrant families face significant financial challenges and seek support from the mosque, non-profit organizations, and generous individuals. The cost of living in the U.S. is rising. Systemic racism,

¹ See <https://www.millatiislami.org/index.php/history>.

Islamophobia, language barriers, and newcomer adjustment and resettlement challenges provide ongoing obstacles to employment and other economic opportunities. According to the Pew Research Center's 2017 study on Muslim Americans (Mohamed and Smith 2017), while Muslims are as likely to have high incomes, they are also more likely than other Americans generally to earn less than \$30,000 per year. Muslims are also more likely than Americans of other faiths to be underemployed. When you cannot afford housing, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other needs for your family, or when all you can afford is the basics, anxiety and frustration set in. Poverty, socioeconomic injustice, and the rising cost of healthcare and housing also impact Muslim families.

Financial and housing supports are necessary for low-income families, which means that *zakāt* accounts in masjids must be strengthened nationwide. Wealthier members obligated to pay *zakāt* should have the mechanism to pay it. Those in need of *zakāt* should also have access to the system to receive it. Families need financial literacy programs to learn how to manage their money and lift themselves out of poverty as they live and adjust in the United States. As a Muslim community, we must work to strengthen our knowledge of community/societal resources, develop a strong organized *zakāt* system, and educate our members to understand how money works for young people and their families.

Anti-Black Racism, Anti-Muslim Hate, and Islamophobia

A reoccurring climate of religious and racial discrimination has led to increasing numbers of hate crimes, which directly impact our families' emotional and mental health. When a violent attack occurs overseas, we hold our breath. When the Oklahoma City bombing occurred in 1995, the Muslim American community was the target of retaliation even though Timothy McVeigh, a white American Christian, was the perpetrator. The 9/11 tragedy left us vulnerable to assaults and hate crimes. The quick passage of the PATRIOT Act by Congress under the Bush administration caused some of us to migrate to Canada to find a safer, more welcoming place to live. I remember my daughter serving as a spokesperson for the local Muslim community and fearing for her safety. Ten minutes from our home, a Sikh individual was killed by a man who "mistook" him for being what he perceived him to be: a "Muslim terrorist."

The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 led to the Muslim Ban, which restricted the travel and immigration plans of Muslims from certain countries. My family and I were on our way from Morocco to the United States during the early days of the ban. Even though we are Black American Muslims with U.S. passports, our family was uncertain of how we would be treated when we arrived home. Islamophobia and racism ramped up throughout the country. And then during the COVID-19 pandemic, in May 2020 we witnessed the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minnesotan policeman. The world erupted with protest against police brutality and systemic racism that had been growing in the U.S. and globally.

The bullying of children because they are Muslim – girls having their hijāb or *khimār* pulled off; and students being subjected to inaccurate, racist information about Islam, Muslims, African Americans, Arabs, and immigrants – promotes an environment of fear and mistrust. Many Muslims and their families live in fear of threats, hate crimes, and anxiety. The Black Lives Matter movement made us even more aware that being Black and

Muslim in a climate of anti-Black and anti-Muslim bias places our mental health and family security at risk. Health disparities became more visible during the pandemic's height.

According to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's 2020 poll, 60% of Muslim Americans reported personally experiencing religious discrimination (Mogahed and Ikramullah 2020). The FBI's hate crime statistics in 2019 suggest that of the reported 1,715 victims of anti-religious hate crimes, 13.2% were victims of anti-Muslim bias (U.S. Department of Justice 2020). Since the October 7 war between Israel and Hamas broke out in recent months, the rate of hate crimes and incidents against Muslim Americans has surged once again.

Incarceration and Reentry

According to prisonpolicy.org (Prison Policy Initiative 2023), the number of people locked up in the U.S. is 1.9 million, and the American prison population has grown by approximately 700% over the last 50 years. The prison incarceration rate for Black people is 1,096 per 100,000 people; for White people it is 214 per 100,000 people. In short, Black Americans are disproportionately overrepresented. Of individuals in state prisons in 2016, 33% had a parent incarcerated while they were children. Of those under the age of 18, 12% were homeless, 42% received public assistance, and 19% lived in public housing. Additionally, 49% of those in the state prisons have substance use disorder and 22% were homeless or housing insecure shortly before incarceration (Prison Policy Initiative 2023). In summary, American prisons are filled with poor and economically disadvantaged people, people of color, and people suffering from substance use disorder and other mental health issues.

In a special report by the U.S. Department of Justice, Glaze and Maruschak (2008) indicated that "an estimated 809,800 prisoners of the 1,518,535 held in the nation's prisons at midyear 2007 were parents of minor children, or children under the age of eighteen. Parents held in the nation's prisons – 52% of state inmates and 63% of federal inmates – reported having an estimated 1,706,600 minor children." Some of the parents were able to maintain a connection with their incarcerated children, while for others the relationship was completely severed or severely disrupted.

Muslim individuals and families are impacted by incarceration. According to the Tayba Foundation, nearly 10% of U.S. prisoners are Muslim (Tayba Foundation, n.d). Many non-Muslims convert to Islam while incarcerated; however, some were born and raised in Muslim families. Incarcerated Muslims are our brothers and sisters. Upon release, they are challenged by societal and community stigma and the lack of housing, employment, and support services available in the larger society and the Muslim community. Without supportive prison and reentry services and the connection to their local Muslim community, these families find it difficult to overcome these and other challenges.

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the Nation of Islam (NOI) played a significant role in the recovery and rehabilitation of its incarcerated and released members. The NOI community and structure provided them with the support and opportunity they needed to reestablish themselves. Today, programs like the Tayba Foundation, Muslims who volunteer in mosque prison services, and those assisting Muslims and their families

impacted by the prison system are making a difference. However, so much more is needed: mental health and substance abuse prevention and recovery services, education to eliminate the stigma, as well as money allocated on the local, state, and federal levels to fund the programs and services that provide housing, support services, employment and educational opportunities for prevention, rehabilitation and reentry to close the revolving door of recidivism.

Marriage Partners for Single Muslims

Marriage is an ongoing concern for Muslim American families. Finding a Muslim spouse in a country in which Muslims are a small minority is a particular challenge. Given this reality, locating a spouse who is both compatible and a good family fit is an ongoing topic of conversation, since marriage is very much a family affair among Muslims.

Increasingly, I have listened to stories of families concerned about to whom and when their adult children will get married; parents worrying about their unmarried sons and daughters who are now moving into their 30s and 40s; as well as those who are divorced. American-born children of immigrants have related conflicts of parental desire that they marry someone from the same culture, tribe, race, or group while they are more interested in marrying someone who has grown up in America and may be from a totally different ethnic or cultural background. Young people want to please their parents, but they also have a different view of what is compatible for them. Many young adult converts also experience conflict with their parents about their conversion as well as marrying a Muslim and someone from a different culture or race.

Single Muslims and their families are struggling to find prospects for marriage in the absence of a large Muslim population and with a non-robust network. Converts are challenged by not having a Muslim family with an extended network of prospects.

Divorce

Divorce is a reality for Muslim Americans, as it is for Americans nationwide. Specifying the current Muslim rate of divorce is difficult because of limited research. Anecdotal evidence among mental health professionals, imams, and community leaders indicates that the rate is climbing. In a 1990 study by Ilyas Ba-Yunus, the reported rate was 31.14% (Ba-Yunus 2000).

Killawi et al. (2014) describe the negative impact of marital dysfunction and divorce on families, which increases psychological distress, grief, and loss and places the overall emotional health of the couple and their children, if any, at risk. The couple experiences interpersonal conflict, as well poor and negative communication, both of which often lead to arguments and hurtful words that cannot be taken back. The marriage's disruption and dissolution leads to financial instability that, in turn, leads to economic distress and poverty, especially for women and children. Divorce destroys and/or weakens the social support networks and extended family ties that a healthy marriage normally provides, thereby increasing emotional distress and decreasing the ability to cope with stress.

Divorce rarely happens with thoughtfulness, empathy, and *ihsān* (goodness and perfection). Instead, it is often contentious and hurtful. Children tend to experience the

adverse effects, which impact them emotionally, behaviorally, socially, physically, and academically. In addition, they often feel caught in the middle, blame themselves for the failed marriage, and tend to sustain its negative consequences. Thankfully when they have supportive people and the needed professional and spiritual services in their lives, children are resilient despite the challenges their parents' divorce presents. It is essential that more is done in our community to prepare our future couples and parents for a healthy marriage and family.

Domestic Violence

The 2011 Peaceful Families Project and Project Sakinah domestic violence survey of 801 Muslim Americans found that 31% reported experiencing abuse within an intimate partner relationship (Peaceful Families Project, n.d.) and 53% reported experiencing some form of domestic violence during their lifetime (Abugideiri et al. 2011).

Sadly, over my years as a community social worker I have become aware of too many cases of domestic abuse. One case could have been prevented if only those who introduced the couple had told the sister, a tall stately African American businesswoman, that the brother she met had a history of abuse and was not a good marriage prospect. But no one told her. She came into the marriage enthusiastic and hopeful, and left it emotionally broken and battered with her teeth missing.

In March 2023 the Chandler, Arizona Muslim community was shaken when NBC local affiliate Channel 12 News reported that a "38-year-old man... is suspected of shooting [his wife] in front of the couple's four children... Police had previously been dispatched to the family's residence for reports of a domestic dispute. The defendant has been booked into jail and is facing charges of first-degree murder and child endangerment, police said" (Reagan 2023). In another report from ABC's Channel 3 affiliate, arrest documents indicated that a neighbor called 911 after being told by the husband, "I shot her [my wife]," as he was leaving the couple's apartment (Gartner and KPHO Staff 2023).

According to community members close to the family, the wife was fleeing the home but had forgotten some important papers. When she returned for them, he found her at the home and shot her. It is difficult to describe the emotional trauma their children will endure. Not only are they mourning the loss of their mother, but they also lost their father who has now been incarcerated. Known by several names, family violence, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and child abuse exist in Muslim families nationwide. Just as families of other cultures and faith traditions, Muslims need help to prevent and stop the violence taking place in our families.

Over the years I learned that Muslims are spending more time planning their weddings than preparing for their marriages. Many are not making wise choices or vetting for compatibility and emotional temperament. Most are not even aware of the red flags they need to know before selecting their future spouse. Most have not taken the time to learn the skills for healthy communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, and relationship building.

Deep Dive: Reflections on Building Strong Muslim Marriages

During my studies in social work, I learned about the protective and resilience factors that enabled families to overcome the challenges they may be facing. I became convinced that many of these challenges could be prevented with early support and education. I became a social work prevention specialist who paid keen attention to strategies that would enable us to prevent and intervene early in marriage and family problems. This led me to create the Before the Nikah course,² focused on helping Muslim couples set up a strong foundation for their marriage from the very beginning of the relationship. This course, along with my book *Before the Nikah: Proven Principles to Help Single Muslims Choose Wisely and Build Strong Marriages* (Book Power Publishing: 2021), helps Muslims develop essential skills for marriage, including how to understand it from an Islamic perspective, establish loving and compassionate homes, avoid toxic and unhealthy relationship patterns, and what kinds of conversations need to be held before marriage. Here, I reflect on some of my thoughts over the decades I have spent as a marriage counselor, marriage educator, and coach.

Childhood Experiences Impact Our Future Marriages and Families

Whether they are resolved or unresolved, early childhood experiences impact our adult lives and future family dynamics. As a marriage and family counselor/social worker, the role of childhood experiences and traumas on my clients, their relationships, and their family dynamics was increasingly apparent to me. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 61% of adults had at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) and 16% had four or more types of ACEs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). They further indicate that preventing such experiences could reduce the number of adults with depression by as much as 44%. Types of childhood traumas include experiencing child abuse, witnessing parents or guardians engage in domestic violence, living with a problem drinker or someone who uses drugs or other substances, having a household member go to prison, or living with a household member who was depressed, mentally ill, or who had attempted suicide.

Prior to marriage, prospective spouses need to discuss the impact of such experiences. According to school psychologist Latisha Ojuriye, in a presentation for my Before the Nikah course students, the following question must be asked as potential spouses get to know each other: how does your childhood adversely impact or positively support your ability to be the best individual, spouse, or parent you can be?

Course participants Jamil and Yasmin learned about the benefits of being aware of early childhood experiences before getting married and the impact of ACEs on a couple's health and mental health, their future relationship, and family dynamics. After taking a quiz and discovering their ACEs scores, they decided to address their scores in individual and premarital counseling in hopes of resolving the impact of these experiences and preventing them from adversely impacting their future relationship and family. They committed to changing the trajectory of the life of their children and future family.

² See <https://www.draneesah.com/before-the-nikah>.

Reflecting on Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Prevention is key; however, like most communities, the Muslim community has not focused on preventive strategies. Rather, we tend to be crisis- and treatment-oriented. When a situation is eminent, we tend to say “Alhamdulillah,” as if there is no action we need to take. The Prophet (pbuh) told us to “tie our camel” and rely on Allah, which means to do what we know how to do before the issue becomes a problem, and then do our part and pray for Allah’s help. More of us act from a crisis/treatment perspective rather than from a proactive prevention mindset.

Therefore, we see that most couples spend more time planning the wedding than preparing for the marriage. Most *nikāh* (Islamic marriage) ceremonies are officiated for couples who have not taken a marriage preparation course or participated in premarital counseling. Imams and masjid policies do not require marriage preparation classes or counseling before performing the *nikāh*. And if anything, what is provided is one brief talk in the imam’s office before the ceremony is performed and the documents are signed.

I remember counseling Amina and Ali. The presenting problem was their conflict over money and his expectations that she would contribute to the household expenses. The conflict went back to their pre-marriage discussions: Amina recalls discussing each other’s expectations for sharing bank accounts or having separate accounts and how different their views were. Their discussion about the *mahr* (marital gift to the bride from the groom, generally of some monetary value) was quite challenging. As they conveyed their early discussions, it seemed that neither really understood its value and purpose. Their mindset about money was not aligned, and their experience with financial management was limited. The purpose of the *mahr*, one’s money mindset, and financial management are often big points of conflict. In survey results published by Orion, 42% of American adults reported that they disagreed about finances with their partners, with 27% of them saying they have money-related disagreements with their partners at least monthly (Orion 2023).

I could not help but wonder if their conflicts would have been prevented or mitigated with marriage education, among other information, about finances and money, conflict resolution skills, as well as premarital counseling to resolve how they would handle financial matters. Lisa Hashem, financial coach and manager of the Muslim Women and Finance podcast, supports financial education for singles and for couples throughout their marriage.

As a community, we need to commit to the continuum of care from prevention to intervention to treatment. Singles in the premarital phase and newlyweds can benefit from marriage preparation, premarital counseling, and newlywed counseling as they select a spouse and adjust to their new life together. Additionally, marriage and family counseling and support at different stages throughout the marriage is also essential.

The Need to Increase Our Spiritual Development and Islamic Education

As I reflect on Muslim family life, I am convinced of the importance of increasing our connection to Allah and His Messenger (pbuh). Marriages tend to do better when the couple comes together with *taqwa* (God-consciousness) as their common value and practice. A strong foundation of *taqwa* is at the core of a healthy Muslim marriage and family. Couples must remember that their purpose as Muslims is to worship Allah and help each other get

to heaven. A deep spiritual commitment between them before Allah is essential, for love and compassion are the glue that leads to peace and tranquility.

Additionally, connecting with the example of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriage and family life are particularly important. So many who grow up without positive examples of healthy relationships in their family will especially benefit from the latter example, for it provides a rubric for healthy family life. His family exemplified the compassion, love, patience, and reliance on Allah needed to strengthen a marriage and build a strong family. We see how he and his wives worked together to accomplish family tasks; demonstrated patience; respected, supported, and encouraged each other; and worked, struggled, and played together.

The Prophet (pbuh) loved Khadijah (may Allah be pleased with her) so much that her passing was a period of significant grief and loss for him. He showed his love by visiting her friends in memory of her. She loved him and supported his mission and the ummah, encouraging him prior to receiving the message and in the most difficult times. He grew her business to a successful enterprise, encouraged 'Ā'isha's (may Allah be pleased with her) scholarship and playfulness as a young woman, and respected Umm Salama's (may Allah be pleased with her) advice when he needed to make a difficult decision. As a community, we must study and model the lessons we learn from his family members and how they related to each other.

During their session, Iman and Abdul Rahman shared that they saw their parents demonstrate violent behavior toward each other. They came from two different families, but had both grown up witnessing similar behaviors at home. They wanted to build a loving relationship with peace and tranquility for themselves and their children, but admitted that they did not know how to do so. They grew up seeing their parents distrustful of each other and engaged in ongoing arguments. As they did not want to repeat this cycle, they devised an intervention plan that included spiritual development with professional counseling. They recommitted to their marriage for Allah's sake, focused on working on positive communication and relationship-building skills, establishing regular prayers, and getting to know more about Allah's attributes as the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful, and Oft-Forgiving.

They endeavored to incorporate aspects of His (*subhāna wa ta'āla*; the Most Glorified, the Most High) attributes into their relationship and to embrace *taqwa* and *imān* (deep faith) as core values in their life together. They asked Allah for help to be kinder and more easy-going with one another. They regularly thanked each other and Allah, studied the Prophet's (pbuh) family life, and practiced trying to be like him and his wives while modeling his characteristics of patience, mercy, calmness, and kindness. They learned to communicate using "I messages" rather than blaming messages, in order to relate to one another in a more loving way. Over time, their love for one another grew. They still had challenges, but they committed to work together to build their relationship for Allah's sake and to build a peaceful marriage that would help them get to heaven.

Positive Communication: An Essential Skill

Positive communication is an essential relationship-building skill, and its absence is blamed for the breakdown of marriage, family, and other key relationships. Our ability to

communicate positively and effectively makes the difference between a loving family life in which we feel cared for and nurtured, and one that is dysfunctional and disconnected. Verbal and nonverbal communication skills allow us to create safe spaces, feel heard, provide encouragement, and promote a sense that we are team players. We want family members to feel included and have their opinions matter.

Sadly, many of us do not develop language that enables us to communicate our emotions in a healthy way. What we say, as well as when and how we say it, does matter. We want our family members to feel heard, seen, and encouraged. Compatibility in our communication styles is essential before the *nikāh* and during the marriage over time. As reported by divorce.laws.com, “[a]ccording to a study by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML), communication problems were the number one reason for divorce in the United States. The study stated that about 67.5% of all marriages failed because of a breakdown in communication” (Divorce Laws 2019).

I remember the case of a couple who both spoke English but were from different cultural ethnic backgrounds. Issa was Dominican and his native language was Spanish. Mariam was African American. In marriage counseling, they complained that the same conversation that would have been brief and easy for a couple who spoke a common native language took them hours and was very difficult. Cross-cultural communication in marriage requires additional understanding and preparation. Issa and Mariam had very different temperaments and worldviews. He grew up with a more authoritarian parenting style focused on obedience and punishment; Mariam was soft spoken and grew up in a family that encouraged her to speak her mind and appreciated her doing so. In short, their communication styles and temperaments were incompatible. A program of premarital assessment, education, skill development, and counseling, as well as a desire to cultivate a loving relationship, may have helped them save their relationship. But by the time they came to me, there was so much hurt and mistrust that they were unwilling to repair it.

It Takes a Village to Support a Healthy Marriage and Family

Over the years I have met many married people and attended a lot of weddings. After seeing marriages that seemed so hopeful but dissolved shortly thereafter or became toxic relationships, I am convinced that in addition to education and skills, it takes a village of support, care, and concern both before the *nikāh* and throughout the ongoing years. The work of finding a compatible spouse in today’s world, in which most folks are meeting and marrying strangers, requires help. In the Before the Nikah course, we encourage participants to identify a marriage support team of family, friends, and trusted advisors to assist and support them in selecting a spouse and growing a healthy marriage, as well as to engage in professional premarital counseling or coaching to help them address whatever issues may arise. For example, how will they raise children, manage responsibilities to their parents who may at some point have to live with them, and address their differing views regarding money and religious practice? Couples need real help to determine if they are compatible.

The longevity and health of marriages in our community must be taken more seriously. We need to assist those whose family members live far away or are not Muslim. We need to let a prospective spouse know that our sister or brother has a community that

cares for them. We need to help community members choose wisely. Parents and those who serve as a *wali* (a bride's guardian) need to understand the importance of taking the time to help their sons and daughters and our brothers and sisters make healthy choices. Additionally, we need to plan to be available to support the newlyweds and their future family throughout the marriage.

As I reflect on the state of our community in terms of marriage and family, I am concerned that we, as a Muslim American community, have not promoted the needed focus on preparing and supporting singles before marriage and couples during marriage over the past 50 years – as if we did not consider that our children would grow up one day and that we would look forward to them getting married. As a community we believe in education for our future career, but not so much in preparing for a healthy marriage and family. Time and time again we marry our children off without any skill or knowledge about what it takes to have a healthy marriage. I encourage all of our imams and community leaders to support a Healthy Marriage Initiative policy that requires premarital education and both encourages and supports our marriage and family educators and therapists as they work to strengthen families and promote our communities' health.

Additionally, Muslims need matrimonial search programs that help individuals who are prepared for a serious marriage meet and determine compatibility. The process has begun with the work of organizations like the Islamic Social Services Association-USA, the Peaceful Families Project, The Family and Youth Institute, Half Our Deen, the Before the Nikah Institute, and the ADAMS Center's pioneering work led by Imam Mohamed Magid. But so much more is needed.

Summary: What is Needed to Promote Healthy Muslim Families?

In addition to marriage preparation for singles and engaged Muslims, both marriage and divorce counseling are much needed professional mental health services. Alhamdulillah these professional services are increasing in availability; however, currently there are not enough nationwide. As a result, I regularly receive requests for Muslim or culturally sensitive therapists. We need more Muslims in counseling, private clinical practice, and agencies that are accessible to Muslim couples. We also need masjids, imams, and community leaders to require at least six sessions of premarital education before they officiate the *nikāh*. Imam Mohamed Magid of ADAMS Center in Virginia is one of the imams who has stood firm on this.

A multipronged approach is necessary to prevent and address family problems, for one size does not fit all. Since families are varied, our approach must be varied, as it depends on how entrenched the challenges are. Are they at the prevention phase? Can we work with the family and its members at the early stages? They may be at-risk but still at a place where we can address the issues before they compound. Are we meeting the family at a crisis? Are their issues already long-term and chronic? Are all of the family members able and willing to participate in the healing process?

Family counseling and therapy is an important service that helps family members identify and explore ways to resolve problems. Families often need a professional to help them sort through their issues and determine an appropriate intervention strategy. Muslim families, depending on their religiosity and practice of Islam, often request and prefer a

professional who understands their religious practices and cultural traditions, and provides services from a culturally responsive perspective. They may prefer someone who is Muslim, or they may be more comfortable with someone who is culturally sensitive but not necessarily Muslim. It has been challenging over the past 40 years, especially in smaller cities and towns, to locate professionals who meet our diverse community's needs. Experiencing family problems is hard enough, but having to work with a provider who is unfamiliar with Muslim traditions and practices, as well as the societal context in which they live, makes it difficult to build the needed therapeutic relationship.

Imams are often at the front line of addressing marital and family problems for those connected to a mosque community. Most U.S. imams are trained in spiritual matters, but not in mental health assessment, treatment, and referrals. It is increasingly important that they and mental health professionals work together to prevent family problems and to provide spiritual guidance and hope in a crisis, since they will likely be at the front lines, and then to hand off to professional providers for mental health treatment. Existing imam training programs and mental health first-aid programs are helping facilitate their working together. However, we still lack enough imams with the mental health education and training and enough mental health professionals who are Muslim or who are of other faiths or of no faith but are culturally and spiritually sensitive enough to meet Muslim needs in various parts of the country.

Alhamdulillah, one model of an imam and mental health professional working together started with Imam Mohamed Magid of the ADAMS Center and Sr. Salma Abugideri, a licensed professional counselor in Virginia. Today, this center has a social service department with a professional social worker, Sue Kafri, and continues to work with Sr. Salma's practice for mental health, family, and marriage counseling. Imam Nadim Ali is one of the country's few imams who is also a licensed professional counselor. We need more compassionate and courageous Muslim religious leaders who understand the diverse social context facing Muslim American families, and how and when to refer to and work with the appropriate mental health professionals. We need more imams and Muslim mental health professionals willing to work together to address family concerns. We need a greater focus on prevention and preparation before marriage as we also endeavor to help and support those who are currently growing a healthy marriage.

References

- Abugideiri, Salma E., Maha B. Alkhateeb, Allison Celik, Bushra Sabri, Anas Coburn, and Sharon A. O'Brien. 2011. *Attitudes of Muslim Men and Women Towards Domestic Violence*. Peaceful Families Project and Project Sakinah. <https://projectsakinah.org/Resources/Surveys/2011-Survey/Survey-Results>.
- Aftab, Awais and Chandan Khandai. 2018. *Mental Health Disparities: Muslim Americans*. American Psychiatric Association, Division of Diversity and Health Equity. <https://www.psychiatry.org/getmedia/3b170f1d-565f-4fec-b9bc-23ea1da1c0ab/Mental-Health-Facts-for-Muslim-Americans.pdf>.

- Ahmed, Sameera, Wahiba Abu-Ras, and Cynthia L. Arfken. 2014. "Prevalence of risk behaviors among U.S. Muslim college students." *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 8, no. 1: 5-19. doi: 10.3998/jmmh.10381607.0008.101.
- Amer, Mona M. and Joseph D. Hovey. 2012. "Anxiety and depression in a post-September 11 sample of Arabs in the USA." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 47, no. 3 (March): 409-418. doi: 10.1007/s00127-011-0341-4.
- Awaad, Rania, Osama El-Gabalawy, Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, Belal Zia, Hooman Keshavarzi, Dalia Mogahed, and Hamada Altalib. 2021. "Suicide Attempts of Muslims Compared With Other Religious Groups in the US." *JAMA Psychiatry* 78, no. 9 (September): 1041-1044. doi: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2021.1813.
- Ba-Yunus, Ilyas. 2000. "Divorce Among Muslims." *Islamic Horizons*, July/August 2000.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Preventing early trauma to improve adult health." Last modified August 23, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>.
- Clay, Rebecca A. 2011. "Muslims in America, post-9/11." *Monitor on Psychology (American Psychological Association)* 42, no. 8 (September): 72. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/09/muslims.html>.
- Divorce Laws. 2019. "Number One Reason for Divorce." Last modified December 22, 2019. <https://divorce.laws.com/number-one-reason-for-divorce>.
- Gartner, Jordan and KPHO Staff. 2023. "'I shot her': Husband kills wife in front of kids days after buying gun." *WSAZ NewsChannel 3*, March 15, 2023. <https://www.wsaz.com/2023/03/16/i-shot-her-husband-kills-wife-front-kids-days-after-buying-gun/>.
- Glaze, Lauren E. and Laura M. Maruschak. 2008. *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Last modified March 30, 2010. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>.
- Killawi, Amal, Manijeh Daneshpour, Arij Elmi, Iman Dadras, and Hamada Hamid. 2014. *Recommendations for Promoting Healthy Marriages & Preventing Divorce in the American Muslim Community*. Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. Published June 2014. https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ISPU_Promoting_Healthy_Marriages_and_Preventing_Divorce_in_the_American_Muslim_Community.pdf.

- Mogahed, Dalia and Erum Ikramullah. 2020. *American Muslim Poll 2020: Amid Pandemic and Protest*. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. Last modified October 1, 2020. <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2020-amid-pandemic-and-protest/>.
- Mohamed, Besheer and Gregory A. Smith. 2017. *U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream: Findings from Pew Research Center's 2017 Survey of U.S. Muslims*. Pew Research Center. Last modified July 26, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.
- Orion. 2023. *Couples and Money Survey Findings*. Published February 2023. <https://orion.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Orion-Advisor-Solutions-Couples-and-Money-research.pdf>.
- Peaceful Families Project. n.d. "Domestic Abuse Statistics." Accessed December 7, 2023. <https://www.peacefulfamilies.org/statistics.html>.
- Prison Policy Initiative. 2023. "55 facts about mass incarceration." Last modified April 2023. https://static.prisonpolicy.org/factsheets/55facts_2023.pdf.
- Reagan, Kevin. 2023. "Mother shot to death in Chandler, police say." *12 News*, March 15, 2023. <https://www.12news.com/article/news/crime/mother-shot-death-chandler-police/75-07499cbd-9b61-423d-80a6-0e09fe60e77f>.
- Tayba Foundation. n.d. "Bring the deen to those who need it most." Accessed December 7, 2023. <https://donate.taybafoundation.org/>.
- U.S. Department of Justice – Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2020. "Hate Crime Statistics, 2019." Published Fall 2020. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2019/topic-pages/victims>.