

# Marital distress in present society

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Received: 12.09.2018; Accepted: 27.05.2019

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■ **ABSTRACT :** Marital distress is a few problems as frequently encountered or as pervasive in their impact. Any person who has experienced significant marital distress, or witnessed the feelings of a friend or relative in the midst of such distress, easily recognizes that marital distress is among the most stressful and upsetting of human problems. Powerful feelings of sadness, anger, rage, disbelief, shock, and depression typically accompany high levels of marital distress. Marital distress is often a major factor in the genesis of diagnosable individual psychopathology. And for many, marital distress ultimately results in divorce with its myriad of additional difficulties and risk factors. Statistics regarding distressed marriages in our society point to how omnipresent and insidious a problem this is. Epidemiological studies typically find 20 per cent of the population to be maritally distressed at any moment in time (Gurman and Fraenkel, 2002). The divorce rate has stabilized, with approximately half of all marriages ending in divorce. Ten to fifteen percent of couples separate in the first four years of marriage and only 70 per cent make it through the first decade of marriage.

■ **KEY WORDS:** Marital, Distress, Therapists

■ **HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER :** Gogoi, Sampreety (2019). Marital distress in present society. *Asian J. Home Sci.*, 14 (1) : 230-235, DOI: 10.15740/HAS/AJHS/14.1/230-235. Copyright@ 2019: Hind Agri-Horticultural Society.

**M**arital distress is one of the most frequently encountered and disturbing human problems. Everyone who is married experiences difficulties, but for some, these troubles reach the point that partners become profoundly disappointed and upset about their marriages and may even come to question whether they want to continue to remain married. Marital distress is very unsettling and the ways marital problems often progress make it easy for things to go from bad to worse. However, in most situations, this flow in a negative direction can be altered. Most marriages can return to being satisfying. Sometimes people can make these changes on their own, but frequently help from a couple therapists is needed.

Marital distress has powerful effects on partners; often leading to great sadness, worry, tension, and problems such as depression. If prolonged, it even has been shown to have direct effect on physical health. The effect on families is also profound, especially when conflict is high. Children raised in high conflict homes tend to have many more problems than other children. And once marriages are distressed, a progression begins that easily becomes a cascade downward, ultimately leading to the ending of a marriage.

## Signs and symptoms:

Individuals in distressed marriages or relationships persistently feel unhappy and dissatisfied with their

relationships. Couples may fight frequently without coming to resolutions. This may cause individuals to feel worn out. Others may rarely fight, but feel disconnected to their partners. As problems persist, communications generally becomes more difficult. Couples may be less intimate or affectionate and engage in sexual activities less often than they used. Individuals may feel sad, depressed, jealous, worrisome, tense, or angry.

### **Causes of marital distress:**

Couples may experience problems early on in their marriages, while others may be happy for many years before problems develop. There are many factors that may lead to marital distress. Below are some of the most common causes of marital distress.

### **Poor communication:**

Experts believe that poor communication is the most common cause of marital distress. Communication skills include verbal, non-verbal (facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tones) and listening skills. All of these skills are important in a relationship because they help people know what to say, how to make good choices and how to behave in different situations.

People with poor communication skills may be unhappy or upset with how their partners are behaving, but they are unable to express their feelings. In other cases, talking about such issues results in fighting. Sometimes people will avoid discussing both some issues in order to prevent arguments. As a result, the person's feelings go unresolved and changes are not made to improve the relationship. Communication problems often cause spouses to feel bad about themselves, their partners and their relationships. When a couple has communication problems, people often feel that their partners are making excessive demands or requesting much more than they can give. Other people may feel that their partners are too withdrawn or do not share or open up enough.

Having poor communication increases the likelihood that other marital problems, such as lack of intimacy, sexual difficulties, and major life transitions, will cause marital distress.

### **Arguing:**

Frequent arguing is also a common cause of marital distress. Many experts believe that the topic being argued

is less important than how the argument is actually handled. If one or both people in a relationship have poor communication skills, they may not be able to properly resolve their arguments and as a result, they might fight often. People, who are unable to compromise, negotiate differences, and listen to others are most likely to face marital difficulties. Some experts suggests that it is important that couples view their relationship as a partnership. Studies show that money is the number one thing couples argue about, followed by issues relating to their children. Other common conflicts involve problems with in-laws, cultural clashes, and differences in values or priorities. For instance, some couples may have very different religious beliefs that come into conflict when they try to make major life decisions. Couples may also disagree with the parenting philosophies of their partners.

### **Lack of intimacy:**

A lack of emotional and/or physical intimacy among couples may also lead to marital distress. According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), it is natural for strong emotions associated with courtship to decline over time. For instance, romantic gestures (such as buying flowers) or weekend date nights may become less frequent over time. Although this is considered normal for most couples, some people may perceive this decline in courtship behaviors as a loss of loving feelings. These feelings may lead to a reduced interest in sexual activities. Intimacy may decline for many other reasons, including emotional stress and sexual difficulties. For instance, working long hours may cause a person to feel tired and stressed when he/she returns home. As a result, his/her partner may not feel as emotionally or physically connected to the person.

### **Sexual difficulties:**

Sexual difficulties, such as erectile dysfunction (ED) or menopause (which leads to a decreased libido), may also lead to marital distress. Sexual activities are important for many relationships because it is one way for couples to be physically intimate and close with one another.

### **Infidelity (affair):**

Infidelity is a potential cause of marital distress. Infidelity may lead to feelings of jealousy and mistrust,

as well as a lack of intimacy.

### **Major life transitions:**

Some couples experience marital distress during major life transition or changes, such as the birth of children or moving. Changes that affect a spouse's role in the relationship, such as retirement, employment success or advancements, or unemployment may also put stress on a relationship.

### **Negative life events:**

Negative life events, such as the death of a loved one, diagnosis of a chronic or terminal illness, bankruptcy, or inability to have children, may lead to marital distress.

### **Substance abuse:**

Substance abuse may lead to marital distress. This type of behavior may strain a couple's relationship and lead to increased arguments. This is because drugs and alcohol may interfere with a person's judgment and cause people to behave in ways they normally would not. If the individual is frequently under the influence of alcohol or drugs, it may lead to a decrease in emotional intimacy. In addition, many substances, including alcohol, may lead to a decreased libido (sex drive).

### **Domestic violence or abuse:**

Domestic abuse or violence may lead to marital distress. Domestic abuse occurs when an individual emotionally, verbally, or physically mistreats his/her spouse or intimate partner. However, victims may also include children and/or other family members.

It is very important that victims suffering abuse contact the appropriate authorities immediately. Domestic abuse is a crime that should not be tolerated. People who are being abused are advised to leave their relationships. Because it may be difficult to leave an abusive relationship, abuse survivors are encouraged to seek the help of a friend, family member, or support group. Staff at emergency shelters can help victims file for court-ordered protection from the abuser, if necessary. If the abuser seeks treatment, including counseling, he/she may be able to change his/her behavior. However, the victim should avoid contact with the abuser until the abuser has received treatment and has shown that he/she is no longer abusive. Victims are also encouraged to seek counseling.

### **Consequences of marital distress:**

Evidence indicates that individuals who have problems in their marriages are more likely to have a variety of psychological problems, including depression and alcoholism. Distressed spouses are also more susceptible to physical health problems. Another problem reported by spouses who are having marital problems is violence within the relationship. Almost one third of all married couples will experience violence at some time in their marriage, with distressed spouses being at greater risk. Marital violence can have a major impact on the relationship and on the psychological, as well as the physical, well-being of each spouse. Finally, behavioral problems in children are more common in families in which the parents are unhappily married.

### **Complications:**

#### *Alcoholism:*

Studies involving long-term, committed couples have shown that individuals who are having problems in their relationships have an increased risk of alcoholism. In such cases, alcohol may be a way of self medicating or temporarily escaping one's problems.

#### *Anxiety:*

According to studies, marital distress has been associated with anxiety disorders. Anxiety is an unpleasant complex combination of emotions that are often accompanied by physical sensations, such as irregular heartbeat, nausea, chest pain, shortness of breath, tension headache, and nervousness.

#### *Depression:*

Individuals who are experiencing marital distress have an increased risk of developing depression. Symptoms of depression may include overwhelming feelings of sadness and grief, loss of interest or pleasure in activities usually enjoyed and feelings of worthlessness or guilt. Depression may result in poor sleep, a change in appetite, severe fatigue, and difficulty concentrating. Severe depression may increase the risk of suicide.

#### *Behavioral/emotional problems in children:*

Children may also be affected by their parents' marital distress. Research has shown that children are more likely to develop behavioral and emotional problems if there is continuous conflict among their parents. Some

children affected by marital distress may act out in school or at home, have low self-esteem, or feel sad, angry, or withdrawn. Children may also exhibit nonverbal or verbal hostility or aggressive behaviours.

*Decreased work productivity:*

Marital distress has been associated with decreased work productivity, especially in men. This may be the result of decreased concentration and preoccupation with problems at home.

*Infidelity:*

Marital distress may cause people to cheat on their partners and have affairs. For instance, if there is a lack of physical and/or emotional intimacy that is straining a couple's relationship, a partner may end up having an affair with someone.

*Violence:*

Distressed couples have a greater risk of experiencing violence at some point in the relationship. Violent or aggressive behaviors can have serious affects on the relationship, as well as the victim's psychological and physical well-being. Abuse typically occurs in cycles. When the abuser gets angry, tension grows and there is a breakdown in communication. Then the abuser verbally or physically mistreats the victim. Afterwards, abusers are usually apologetic. In some cases, the abuser will deny that the abuse ever took place. Sometimes the abuser may behave pleasantly and kindly towards the victim most of the time. This often makes it difficult for the victim to leave the abuser.

**The kinds of help that work:**

The good news is that there are effective treatments for marital distress. Given a willingness to work on a marriage, most people can make their marriages satisfying again. No one begins as a perfect partner. Marriage depends on a number of skills, such as being able to understand yourself, understand your partner, problem solve, and negotiate differences. Sometimes patterns we learned in our families growing up aren't effective, but are carried over to a marriage. And sometimes the stresses of life make it difficult to stay happily married.

Couple therapists have special training in couple therapy. They know how to help couples have a sense of progress even as they struggle with difficult issues.

There are many kinds of effective couple therapy. Some promote skills and practice, others look more at the past and how things got this way; most combine the two. Beginning couple therapy is not easy. For most people, it's hard to begin to share with a person you don't know about marital difficulties, and it's hard not to be discouraged as you argue about these issues at first in front of a therapist. Couples with marital distress are often discouraged and have trouble believing that couple therapy can help. But couples who begin marital therapy begin to create a process for overcoming their difficulties. Sometimes the resolution of problems happens very quickly, though more typically a longer period is needed. For most, it's hard to work on these problems at first, but ultimately that becomes easier and problems are resolved.

Behavioral marital therapy has been well-established as a beneficial treatment for marital distress. Some evidence also suggests that emotionally-focused couple's therapy and insight oriented marital therapy are useful for treatment of marital distress. While other psychotherapies may be helpful for treatment of marital distress, they have not been evaluated scientifically.

**How to know when to seek help:**

No one has a perfect marriage, and almost every couple can benefit from some help at times with their marriage. Pre-marital preparation and marital enrichment programmes such as the prevention and relationship enhancement programme (PREP) and the relationship enhancement programme are available in many localities and most people find them helpful regardless of how well their relationship is going. And many people seek couple counseling with a trained therapist to improve their marriages even when their marriages are not unduly distressed. One needs not to be in a distressed marriage to be in marital therapy. Many people with very solid marriages choose this path to enhance their relationships.

In distressed marriages, people feel fundamentally dissatisfied with their marriages. Disappointment in the relationship doesn't just come and go; it is a constant companion. Most frequently, couples with high levels of marital distress fight a good deal and their fights don't lead to resolution, but simply a sense of being worn out. Or they may not fight, but simply feel completely disconnected. People stop doing nice things for each other, they stop communicating, and things tend to go from bad to worse. Frequent arguments that don't get

resolved, loss of good feelings and loss of friendship, sex and vitality are other signs that a marriage is distressed. Other signs, such as contempt, withdrawal, violence, and a complete loss of connection signal that a marriage is in desperate trouble and that it is at high risk for divorce. Serious, long-term, committed relationships can experience these kinds of major problems, too.

### Facts about marital distress:

Younger people in the U.S. who are marrying for the first time face roughly a 40-50 per cent chance of divorcing in their lifetime under current trends (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Of first marriages that end in divorce, many end in the first 3 to 5 years. (As one example, for first marriages ending in divorce among women aged 25 to 29, the median length of marriage before divorce in 1990 was 3.4 years; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Adults and children are at increased risk for mental and physical problems due to marital distress (e.g., Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994; Coie *et al.*, 1993; Coyne, *et al.*, 1987; Cowan and Cowan, 1992 and Fincham *et al.*, 1993).

Mismanaged conflict and negative interaction in marriage predicts both marital distress and negative effects for children (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Markman and Hahlweg, 1993; Clements *et al.*, 1997; Cowan and Cowan, 1992 and Grych and Fincham, 1990).

Marital problems are associated with decreased work productivity, especially for men (e.g., Forthofer *et al.*, 1996).

A variety of studies suggest that the seeds of marital distress and divorce are there for many couples when they say, "I Do." These studies show that premarital (or early marital) variables can predict which couples will do well and which will not with accuracies of 80 per cent up to 94 per cent (e.g., Clements *et al.*, 1997; Fowers *et al.*, 1996; Gottman, 1994; Karney and Bradbury, 1995; Kelly and Conley, 1987 and Rogge and Bradbury, 1999).

Many more couples live together prior to marriage than in the past-recent estimates are in the range of 60+% (Stanley and Markman, 1997 and Bumpass and Sweet, 1991). These couples are less likely to stay married, probably mostly due to the fact that they are less conservative about marriage and divorce in the first place.

Money is the one thing that people say they argue

about most in marriage, followed by children (Stanley and Markman, 1997). But, there is a lot of reason to believe that what couples argue about is not as important as how they argue (Markman *et al.*, 1994).

### Conclusion:

If one is experiencing marital distress, one should look for a marital therapist who has had specific training, is comfortable with emotional intensity and will offer clear direction to help resolve identified problems. One should be sure that the marital therapist will respect the integrity of marriage and work towards resolving problems. If in the process one decides to end his or her marriage, it should be a matter of his or her decision, not the outcome of poor therapy. Poor therapy can hurt. Good therapy can help.

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