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The Family Cycle (I) – Euphoric and Dysphoric Cycles in Marriage

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

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Despite all the fashionable theories of marriage, the narratives and the feminists, the reasons to engage in marriage largely remain the same. True, there have been role reversals and new stereotypes have cropped up. But the biological, physiological and biochemical facts were less amenable to modern criticisms of culture. Men are still men and women are still women in more than one respect.

Men and women marry for the same reasons:

The Sexual Dyad - formed due to sexual attraction and in order to secure a stable, consistent and permanently available source of sexual gratification.

The Economic Dyad - To form a functioning economic unit within which the economic activities of the members of the dyad and of additional entrants will be concentrated. The economic unit generates more wealth than it consumes and the synergy between its members is likely to lead to gains in production and in productivity relative to individual efforts and investment.

The Social Dyad - The members of the couple bond as a result of implicit or explicit, direct, or indirect social pressure. This pressure can manifest itself in numerous forms. In Judaism, a person cannot belong to some religious vocations, unless he is married. This is economic pressure. In most human societies, avowed bachelors are considered to be socially deviant and abnormal. They are condemned by society, ridiculed, shunned and isolated, effectively ex-communicated. Partly to avoid these sanctions and partly to enjoy the warmth provided by conformity and acceptance, couples marry. Today, a myriad of lifestyles is on offer. The old fashioned, nuclear marriage is one of many variants. Children are reared by single parents. Homosexual couples abound. But in all this turbulence, a pattern is discernible : almost 95% of the adult population gets married ultimately. They settle into a two-member arrangement, whether formalized and sanctioned religiously or legally - or not.

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The Companionship Dyad - Formed by adults in search of sources of long-term and stable support, emotional warmth, empathy, care, good advice and intimacy. The members of these couples tend to define themselves as each other's best friends.

It is folk wisdom to state that the first three types of dyad arrangements suffer from instability. Sexual attraction wanes and is replaced by sexual attrition in most cases. This could lead to the adoption of non-conventional sexual behaviour patterns (sexual abstinence, group sex, couple swapping, etc.) - or to recurrent marital infidelity. Economics are not sufficient grounds for a lasting relationship, either. In today's world, both partners are potentially financially independent. This new found autonomy corrodes the old patriarchal-domineering-disciplinarian pattern of relationship. It is replaced by a more balanced, business like, version with children and the couple's welfare and life standard as the products. Marriages based solely on these considerations and motivations are as easy to dismantle and as likely to unravel as is any other business collaboration. Social pressures are a potent maintainer of family cohesiveness and apparent stability. But - being enforced from the outside - it resembles detention

rather than a voluntary arrangement, with the same level of happiness to go with it. Moreover, social norms, peer pressure, social conformity - cannot be relied upon to fulfil the roles of stabilizer and shock absorber reliably. Norms change, peer pressure can adversely influence the survival of the marriage ("If all my friends are divorced and apparently content, why shouldn't I try it, too?").

It is only the companionship dyad, which appears to be enduring. Friendships deepen with time. While sex deteriorates, economic motives are reversible or voidable, and social norms are fickle - companionship, like wine, gets better with time. Even when planted on the most desolate land, under the most difficult and insidious circumstances - this obdurate seed sprouts and blossoms.

"Matchmaking is done in heaven" goes the old Jewish saying but Jewish matchmakers were not averse to lending the divine process a hand. After closely scrutinizing the background of both candidates - male and female - a marriage was pronounced. In other cultures, marriages were arranged by prospective or actual fathers without asking for the embryos or the toddlers' consent.

The surprising fact is that arranged marriages last much longer than those, which are, ostensibly, the result of romantic love. Moreover: the longer a couple cohabitates prior to the marriage, the higher the likelihood of divorce. So, romantic love and cohabitation ("getting to know each other better") are negative precursors and predictors of marital longevity, contrary to commonsense.

Companionship grows out of friction within a formal arrangement, which is devoid of "escape clauses". In marriages where divorce is not an option (due to prohibitive economic or social costs or because of legal impossibility) - companionship will grudgingly develop and with it contentment, if not happiness. Companionship is the offspring of pity and empathy and shared events and fears and common suffering and the wish to protect and to shield and habit forming. Sex is fire - companionship is old slippers: comfortable, static, useful, warm, secure. We get attached very quickly and very thoroughly to that with which we are in constant touch. This is a reflex that has to do with survival. We attach to other mothers and have our mothers attach to us. In the absence of social interactions, we die younger. We need to bond and to create dependency in others.

The marital cycle is composed of euphorias and dysphorias (which are more of the nature of panic).

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They are the source of our dynamism in seeking out mates, copulating, coupling (marrying) and reproducing. The source of these changing moods is to be found in the meaning that we attach to our marriages. They constitute the real, irrevocable, irreversible and serious entry into adult society. Previous rites of passage (like the Jewish Bar Mitzvah, the Christian Communion and more exotic rites elsewhere) prepare us only partially to the shock of realizing that we are about to emulate our parents.

During the first years of our lives, we tend to view our parents as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent demigods (or complete gods). Our perception of them, of ourselves and of the world is magical. All are entangled, constantly interacting, identity interchanging entities. Our parents are idealized and, then, as we get disillusioned, they are internalized to become the first and most important among the myriad of inner voices that guide our lives. As we grow up (adolescence) we rebel against our parents (in the final phases of identity formation) and then learn to accept them and to resort to them in times of need. But the primordial gods of our infancy never die, nor do they lie dormant. They lurk in our superego, conducting an incessant dialogue with the other structures of our personality. They constantly criticize and analyse, make suggestions and reproach. The hiss of these voices is the background radiation of our personal big bang.

Thus, to get married, is to become gods, to commit sacrilege, to violate the very existence of our

mother and father, to defile the inner sanctum of our formative years. This is a rebellion so momentous, so all encompassing, touching upon the very foundation of our personality - that we shudder in anticipation of the imminent and, no doubt, horrible punishment that awaits us for being so presumptuous and iconoclastic. This, indeed, is the first dysphoria, which accompanies our mental preparations. Preparedness is achieved at a cost of great consternation and the activation of a host of primitive defence mechanisms, which lay dormant hitherto. We deny, we regress, we repress, we project - to no avail. The battle is waged and it is horrific to behold. Luckily, only its echoes reach our consciousness and only in our dreams does it find a fuller (though more symbol laden) expression.

This self-induced panic is the result of a conflict. On the one hand, the person knows that it is absolutely life threatening to remain alone (both biologically and psychologically). A feeling of urgency emerges which propels the person with a great thrust to find a mate. On the other hand, there is this feeling of impending disaster, that he is doing something wrong, that an act of blasphemy and sacrilege is in the making. Getting married is the most terrifying rite of passage. The reaction is to confine oneself to known territories. The terra cognita of one's neighbourhood, country, language, race, culture, language, background, profession, social stratum, education. The individual defines himself by belonging to these groups. They imbue him with feelings of security and firmness. It is to them that he applies in his quest to find a mate. There, in the confidence of yore, he seeks to find the security of morrow. Solace can be found in familiar grounds. The panicked person can be calmed and restored among his peers and (mental, economic, social) brethren. No wonder that more than 80% of the marriages take place among members of the same social class, profession, race, creed and breed. True: the chances to come across a mate are bigger within these groups and associations - but the more predominant reason is the comfort that it provides. The dysphoria is replaced by an euphoria.

This is the euphoria, which naturally accompanies any triumph in life. Overcoming the panic is such a triumph and not a mean one at that. Subduing the internal tyrants (or guides, depending on the

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character of the primary objects) of yesteryear qualifies the young adult to become one himself. He cannot become a parent unless and until he eradicates his parents. This is patricide and matricide committed with great trepidation and pain. But the victory is rewarding all the same and it leads to feelings of renewed vigour, new-found optimism, sensations of omnipotence and other traces of magical thinking. The adult is ready to court his mate, woo her, hypnotize her into being his. He is full of the powers of life, of hormones, of energy. He gushes forth, he resounds with the tintinnabulation's of a better future, his eyes glint, his speech revives. In short, he is immersed in romantic love. Being a suitor is a full time emotional job. The chances of success are enhanced the more mentally and emotionally available is the youth, the less burdened he is with past unresolved conflicts. The more successfully resolved the previous, dysphoric phase - the more vigorous the ensuing euphoric one and the bigger the chances of mating, generation and reproduction.

But our conflicts are never really put to eternal rest. They lie dormant in the waiting. The next anti-climatic dysphoric phase transpires when the attempts to secure (the consent of) a mate are met with success. It is easier and more satisfying to dream. Fighting for a cause is always preferable to the dreariness of materializing it. Mundane routine is the enemy of love and of optimism. This is where all dreams end and harsh reality intrudes with its uncompromising demands. The assent of the future spouse forces the youth to move forward in a path which grows irreversible and ominous as he progresses. The emotional investment is about to acquire economic and social dimensions. The weight is growing heavier, the commitment deeper, the escape remoter, the end inevitable. The person feels trapped, shackled, threatened. His newfound stability flounders. He staggers along a way of no return leading to what looks like a dead end. The strength of these negative emotions depends, to a very large extent, on the parental models of the individual and on the kind of family life that he experienced.

The worse the earlier (and only) available example - the mightier the sense of entrapment and resulting paranoia and backlash.

But most people overcome this stage fright and proceed to formalize a relationship. They get married in a religious institution, or in a civil court, or sign a contract, or make their own arrangements. The formality resides in the institutionalization of the relationship - not necessarily in the choice of the legal host. This decision, this leap of faith is the corridor, which leads to the palatial hall of post-nuptial euphoria.

This time the euphoria is mostly a social reaction. The new status (just married) bears a cornucopia of social rewards and incentives, some of them enshrined in legislation. Economic benefits, social approval, familial support, the envious reactions of the younger, the expectations and joys of marriage (freely available sex, children, lack of parental or societal control, newly experienced unrestrained and almost unconstrained freedoms). All these infuse the person with another magical bout of feelings of omnipotence. The control that he exercises over his "lebensraum", over his spouse, over his life is translated into a fountain of mental forces emanating from the person's very being. He feels confidence, his self esteem skyrockets, he sets high goals and seriously intends to achieve them. To him, everything is possible, now that he is left to his own devices and is supported by his mate. With luck and the right partner, this frame of mind can last and be prolonged. However, as life's disappointments accumulate, obstacles mount, the possible sorted out from the improbable and time inexorably passes - the feeling of well being and of willingness to take on the world and its challenges

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abates. The reserves of energy and determination dwindle. Gradually, the person slides into a dysphoric (even anhedonic or depressed) mood which colours his entire life.

The coloration stops at nothing. The routines of his life, their mundane attributes, the contrast between the glamour of our dreams (however realistically construed) and the reality of our day to day existence - these erode his previous horizon. It tends to shrink and imprison him in what looks like a life sentence. He feels suffocated and in his bitterness and agony, in his fear of entrapment, he lashes at his spouse. She represents to him this dead end situation. Had it not been for this new responsibility - he would not have let his life atrophy thus. Thoughts of breaking loose, of going back to the parental nest, of revoking the arrangements agreed upon begin to frequent the troubled mind and to intrude upon all planning. Dismantling the existing is a frightening prospect. Again, panic sets in. Conflict rears its ugly head. Cognitive dissonance abounds. Inner turmoil leads to irresponsible, self-defeating and self-destructive behaviour. A lot of marriages end here. Those that survive do so because of children.

In his quest for an outlet, a solution, a release of the bottled tensions, an exit from numbing boredom, from professional inertia and "death" - both members of the couple (providing they still possess the minimal wish to "save" the marriage) hit upon the same idea but from different directions. The woman finds it an attractive and efficient way of securing the bonding, fastening the relationship and transforming it into a long-term commitment. Bringing a child to the world is perceived by her to be a "double whammy" (partly because of social and cultural conditioning during the socialization process). On the one hand, it is in all likelihood the glue to cement the hitherto marriage of fun or of convenience. On the other, it is the ultimate manifestation of her femininity. Children are, therefore, brought to the world as an insurance policy against the disintegration of their parents' relationships. Love and attachment follow later.

The male reaction is more compounded. At first, the child is (at least unconsciously) perceived to be an extension of the state of entrapment and stagnation. The man realizes that a child will only "drag him deeper" into the quagmire. The quicksand characteristics of his life seem to be only amplified by this

new entrant. The dysphoria deepens and matures into full-fledged panic. It then subsides and gives way to a sense of awe and wonder. As it increases, it becomes all-pervasive. A psychedelic feeling of being part parent (to the child) and part child (to his own parents) ensues. The birth of the child and his first stages of development only serve to deepen this odd sensation.

Child rearing is a difficult task. It is time and energy consuming. It is emotionally taxing. It denies the parent long obtained achievements and long granted rights (such as privacy or intimacy or self-indulgence or even sleep). It is a full-blown crisis and trauma with potentially the severest consequences. The strain on the relationship of the parents is enormous. They either completely break down - or are revived by the common challenge and hardships. A period of collaboration and reciprocity, of mutual support and increasing love follows. An euphoric phase sets in. Everything else pales besides the little miracle. The child becomes the centre of Narcissistic feelings, of hopes and fears, the heart of an emotional tornado. So much is vested and invested in him and, initially, the child gives so much in return that it blots away the daily problems, tedious procedures, failures, disappointments and aggravations. But this role of his is temporary. The more autonomous a child becomes, the more knowledgeable, the less innocent - the less rewarding, the more frustrating, the

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sadder the scene, the more dysphoric. The children's adolescence, the dysfunction of a couple, the members of which grew apart, developed separately and are estranged - set the scenery and pave the way to the next major dysphoria: the midlife crisis.

This, essentially, is a crisis of reckoning, of inventory taking, a disillusionment, a realization and assimilation of one's mortality. The person looks back and sees how little he has achieved, how short the time left, how unrealistic his expectations were and are, how alienated he is from his society, his country, his culture, his closest, how ill-equipped he is to cope with all this and how irrelevant and unhelpful is marriage is. To him, it is all a fake, a Potemkin village, a facade behind which rot and corruption have consumed his life and corroded his vitality. This seems to be a last chance to recuperate, to recover lost ground, to strike one more time. Aided by others' youth (a young lover, students, his own children, a young partner or consultant, a start up company) the person tries to recreate his beginnings in a vain effort to make amends, not to commit the same mistakes twice. This crisis is exacerbated by the "empty nest" syndrome (as children grow up and live the parental home). A major topic of consensus, a catalyst of interaction between the members of the couple thus disappears. The vacuity of the relationship, the gaping hole formed by the termites of a thousand marital discords is revealed. It is the couple's chance to fill it in with empathy and mutual support. Most fail, however. They discover that they lost faith in their powers to rejuvenate each other. They are suffocated by fumes of grudges, regrets and sorrows. They want out into a fresher (younger) atmosphere. And out they go. Those who do remain, revert to accommodation rather than to love, to co-existence rather to experimentation, to arrangements of convenience rather to revival. It is a sad sight to behold. As biological decay sets in, the couple heads into the ultimate dysphoria: ageing and death.

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited" and the editor of mental health categories in The Open Directory, Suite101, and searcheurope.com.

His web site:

Frequently asked questions regarding narcissism:

Narcissistic Personality Disorder on Suite101:

Marriage Counseling

By Steve Holloway

Currently, the western world has a divorce rate of close to 50%. Some countries have an even higher rate. So why are we seeing an increase in divorce and how can marriage counseling help save marriage - yours and other peoples?

I think it's fair to say that the easier you make something the more often it will occur. If it becomes more frequent it loses its taboo and therefore becomes far more acceptable in society's eyes.

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My wife is from a divorced family. When she was a kid at school she was in the minority and it was a stigma. Now, my children are in the minority of those whose parents are still together. Of course, one of the major impacts of divorce is on the family. The impact on young children is often underestimated and we should recognize that even though one in two marriages may end - no matter how common, it doesn't reduce the impact on the family.

Marriage counseling is form of therapy and conflict resolution. It is normally carried out by trained psychotherapist (though not always). For it to work properly both parties need to attend, though separate sessions will most likely be helpful.

If you are considering seeing a marriage counselor then here a few points to consider and questions to ask to help save marriage.

1. Is a first assessment session free?
2. How many times a week are needed?
3. Do you need to pay after each session?
4. Is the marriage counselor qualified?
5. Is the marriage counselor recommended by someone you trust?
6. How long will each session be?
7. Are you able to contact the marriage Counselor outside of session times?
8. Will the sessions fit in with your work schedule?

I am all for marriage counseling to save marriage, however, very often people are being paid huge sums to point out the blindingly obvious. In fact a lot of issues are screaming out to be noticed and normally have been by friends and family.

Of course, having an independent ear can be very useful – but you can achieve a huge amount yourself. With the right techniques, you can actually conduct your own marriage counseling.

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