

THREATS TO FAMILY COHESION IN A DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract: The modern period is called the digital era on account of the quantum advances that the society has made in the digital world. However, these technological leaps are not without its perilous repercussions felt mainly on the family front. Since many of the modern couples are ill-equipped to begin a family life, and as many of them are independent in thought and movements, especially among the working couple, misunderstanding in relationship is quite natural. When this is coupled with several unfulfilled expectations, which is normal in any relationship, brokenness in marital relationship can only be expected. In a cohesive family, raising children is almost a fulltime affair for the husband and wife because of the distractions and hazards that are posed by the media and social networks. In a family experiencing emotional jolts, raising children is a real challenge for the parents. More often than not, these stresses lead the couples to addictive behaviour which is often an escape from the reality. The gradual drift towards inadequate mental health suffered by the couples necessitates therapeutic interventions family and counselling. The author concludes the study with a few tips to restore and maintain family stability.

Keywords: family, marriage, divorce, challenges, personality, broken marriage, family survey, children, misunderstanding, society, pornography, internet, sexual aberrations, youth, parents, mental health, counselling, family stability

1. Introduction

Where does the modern family heading: towards building a constructive society or a destructive society? As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live.¹

¹Message delivered by Pope John Paul II in a homily at Perth, Australia on 30 November 1986. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19861130_perth-australia.html

Everywhere in the world, family is considered to be the building block of the society, and the greatest human fulfilment lies there. Family is founded on a network of relationships. However, in the modern society, the web relationships at home between parents and children, husband and wife are perceived to be weak. Normally, the first step of constituting a family is marriage. A marriage is great not when a perfect couple comes together. It is great when an imperfect couple - a man and woman - with different personalities grows together and learns to enjoy their differences. However, in today's individualistic society, the deep affection among the family members that once prevailed in the families is fast disappearing. The family, as yesterday's generation knew it, is being challenged in the entire world today. In this brief reflection, we dwell upon the various challenges that families are facing today and propose a few ways to face these challenges in order to create and maintain a healthy family.

2. The Challenges of the Modern Family

The challenges that the modern families face these days range from minor to serious, sometimes reaching the crisis-level. Each of these challenges demands a different kind of approach. The strained relationship between parents and children creates distress within a family. Poor communication between members and lack of discipline among children are very common challenges. Sometimes there are constant battles between siblings, and the parents are not competent to help resolve these conflicts. Divorce and the subsequent creation of stepfamilies create hurdles, sometimes for all the members of the family. Sometimes, the relationship between the couple itself poses a challenge. Lack of proper communication, constant conflict and lack of intimacy, sexual issues and problems related to in-laws are concerns in modern families.

Members of the family today seem not to have learnt how to love. The absence of love wipes out family relationships and makes healthy personality development impossible. The shifting values and changing times make family relationships fragile and lead to break-ups. Some of the common reasons of family break-ups are emotional incompatibility, ego clashes, debts and alcoholism, unfaithfulness of spouse, impotency and independence of the new generation, parental interference and mental instability. In the following pages, we make a study of some of these issues faced by the modern family.

2.1. Broken Marital Relationship

The divorce rate in India is increasing among the young married couples.² A recent study conducted by Family Apostolate Training and Research Institute confirms that divorce-seeking couples go for it mostly within the first three years of marriage. As more and more youngsters and newly-weds tend to log on to e-relationships, family life appears to be threatened more and more by what is called 'digital infidelity'. The spouse is in communication frequently with a stranger through SMS, email, Facebook, WhatsApp and the like, using unsavoury texts. The shocking fact is that digital relationships are resulting in the collapse of family ties.

Statistics shows that 1 out of 100 Indian marriages end up to a divorce.³ This is an unusual trend in a country where the divorce rate was just 1 in 1,000 ten years ago. The Indian family court officials say that the number of divorce applications has doubled and even tripled in cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Lucknow over the past five years. The reasons for the increasing number of divorces are the fading influence of the family, the growing psychological and financial independence of women and late marriages resulting in a greater reluctance to compromise or change set ways and lifestyles.⁴ Three more family courts were opened in Bengaluru in 2013 to cater to the increasing demand of the society regarding family disputes, raising the total number of such courts to six. There are 8,600 cases pending in the courts and about 500 new cases are added every year. 8347 divorce cases were filed in Kolkata and about 2000 divorce cases were filed in the Lucknow family court in 2014. Kerala appears to be sitting atop a social volcano if the sheer number of divorce cases says something.⁵ The Kerala Chief Minister, Mr Oommen Chandy, on the floor of the State Assembly, stated that the total number of divorce cases filed in various family courts in Kerala between January 2011 and January 2012 was as high as 44,236.

The society today has become freer than before. The working couple find themselves in close proximity with the colleagues of the

²J. Britty, "An Exploratory Study on the Problems of Separated Couples," Unpublished Thesis, FATRI, 2011.

³"Divorce Rate in India Increasing," Indiafacts on 5 January 2015 in *Statistics*, <http://indiafacts.in/uncategorized/divorce-rate-india>.

⁴Apoorva Dutt, "How and Why Number of Young Indian Couples Getting Divorced Has Risen Sharply," *Hindustan Times*, 4 January 2015.

⁵S. Shanavas, "Divorce: Law and Procedure," at: http://parting.hpge.co.in/divorce-thoughts_96679099.html, accessed on 23 March 2012.

opposite sex and sometimes they are attracted to each other. There have been cases of fathers deserting the family as he has an affair with another woman at the work place and mothers leaving their children as she elopes with another man, often after a prolonged period in which the affair develops and decisions are made. The extramarital relationships not only destroy the sanctity of the marriage but also produce broken families and broken societies. It has been noted that many of the recent cases reported in various family counselling centres involve love affairs between married women and boys who are younger and from a different religious background.

Infidelity sometimes is the outcome of a problematic marriage and sometimes it is the cause of such a marriage. Surprisingly, this trend of cheating on one's partner is on the rise in India. Recently, a survey was conducted on infidelity by Ashley Madison, a global dating website for those who are married or already in a relationship.⁶ Responses were collected from 75,321 respondents among whom 80% were married. The survey revealed that 76% of Indian women and 61% of men don't think that infidelity is immoral. But, of those surveyed, 64% of men and 88% women admitted feeling guilty about cheating. What makes matters worse is that most of these young men and women live away from their homes and do not have the support of family elders to sort out their marital disputes. Indeed, economic independence of women has ensured that they now view divorce as an alternative to an unhappy marriage. On the other hand, the society's attitude towards divorce has also undergone a change and a woman who has walked out of a marriage is no longer stigmatized the way that she once was. However, divorce at any time in life can be painful and it is an ordeal that affects the entire family. It splits apart an intimate relationship developed over a number of years and pushes the persons involved into a new and independent and in some cases, into an uncertain and insecure lifestyle.

It is the children who become the victims of devastating effects of divorce. The effect of a broken family is a tremendous burden on a child. The experience increases his or her behavioural, emotional and psychiatric risks. Moreover, divorce permanently weakens the relationship between children and parents, leads them to destructive ways of handling conflict, diminishes their social competence and tells upon their own relationships later in life.

⁶<https://www.ashleymadison.com>. This website was recently launched in India.

2.2. Unfulfilled Expectations

One of the saddest scenarios in relationships is entering into them with all kinds of expectations and over the years, feeling disappointed again and again when these expectations are not met. Almost everyone enters married life with pre-set ideas of what a marriage relationship should be, and often unconsciously tries to conform life to their idea of marriage. Wives and husbands often have unrealistic expectations about what marriage should provide them. The gap between the expectation and reality produces disappointment, discouragement and finally, disillusionment.

The greatest hurdle in expectations in general is that one of the parties concerned knows what his or her expectations are, but it is unlikely that the partner does! Even more dangerous and frustrating are the expectations that cannot be named, yet they expect their partner to fulfil them. As one enters into marriage, it is advisable to know that it is not the partner's responsibility to fulfil one's expectations; it is each one's job to learn to walk with the other offering all you can to the relationship.

2.3. Unfinished Business and Unresolved Issues

The unexpressed emotions in life recede into the background as unfinished business, exerting a harmful influence and causing self-harming behaviour. A frequent cause of conflict in relationships is unresolved baggage of unexpressed emotions from youth. These unresolved issues can harm self and others such as associates and family members in many ways. For example, if women, in their young adulthood suffered hardships and torturing from their in-laws, there is a possibility of them falling into the trap of torturing behavioural pattern in later years. Similarly, if a person grew up in a loud, violent or abusive environment, that person's response to conflict, arguing or confrontation, would be significantly different from a person whose home environment was encouraging, reassuring and secure. The latter is likely to be naturally skilled at conflict resolution. The old baggage follow people in ways they are not conscious of. They need to be helped to resolve their unfinished business and issues that have their roots in the past experiences.

When marital problems are not resolved to the satisfaction of both, resentment builds and erodes relationships. People attempting suicide have been found to be suffering from unbearable emotional pain caused by pent-up emotions. The majority of them are those who, at a

particular time, feel isolated, desperately unhappy and lonely because of pressures which they believe they cannot cope with, but in fact can. Most of the time people who try to kill themselves suffer from depression due to unresolved issues. Family problems contributed to a lion's share of suicide cases in India are due to disputes within the family and unresolved issues of the past.

2.4. Misunderstanding in Relationship

The most commonly reported relationship issue by far is related to communication or the lack of it. In many relationships the interest seems to lie primarily in getting one's own point of view heard and understood rather than maintaining an interest in hearing and understanding that of the other. If people cared to listen to the other person with as much interest as he or she wished the other would listen to them, both would end up receiving exactly what they are looking for! By and large, people get angry when there is a misunderstanding, when things go out of their control, when there is conflict concerning values, attitudes, views and desires. Often, conflicts occur in the family when, fuelled by suspicion and misunderstandings spouses engage in arguments and jump to the wrong conclusions.

Some spouses find it difficult to manage their feelings and become intentionally aggressive. Words hurt severely, and can cut-off a relationship. Belittling, nagging, unfavourable comparisons with others, etc. are extremely harmful. The constant conflicts involving these factors tend to wound the person leading him/her to dejection. The lack of quality time for family members is another factor that leads to misunderstanding and conflicts. Parents who do not have the time for their children, and spouses who do not have time for each other, live disconnected and fragmented life.

2.5. Addictive Behaviours

A person who is subject to an addiction is truly physically compelled to do something such as drinking, smoking, masturbating, etc. A particular habit becomes an addiction when a person loses the power either to control or to stop the behaviour or the activity. Alcoholism is a socially destructive addiction especially among men that debilitate most of the families. ⁷The average age people started drinking

⁷“Scaling New Heights,” <http://www.sonyvellayani.com/2009/06/alcoholism-and-kerala-made-for-each.html>, accessed on 25 June 2009.

dropped from 19 years in 1986 to 13.5 years in 2014. Addiction is always the main focus of an addict. Compulsively, it takes precedence above marriage and family, and generally, the spouse feels angry and is embarrassed at his/her lack of consideration for others. Those who have suffered from addictive behaviours have experienced that their addiction affects all aspects of their life. Alcohol and drugs cripple one mentally and one ends up displaying inconsistent and irresponsible behaviour. It leads to the breakdown of the family. It has been found that if the addict is unable to reform, he/she blames on his/her partner, who may try to hold the relationship together for a while, but will eventually give up if there is no sign of remedial action or recovery in the horizon.

The society needs to address urgently the threats that the adolescents and youth face today. Many youngsters are addicted to alcohol, drugs and various kinds of stimulants and tobacco products. The use of the internet has increased considerably among the teenagers and adults during the last few years. Clinical observations made on the increasing use of the internet lead to the conclusion that some people 'get hooked' to it and develop a cyber-addiction. Pornography, available on the internet and elsewhere, impedes our relationships with family, and God. Since the sexual drive in teenagers is very forceful, the unmonitored and irresponsible use of the internet by them can be very harmful both to themselves and to the society. Their natural sexual instinct, coupled with their curiosity leads them to develop wrong relationships and to indulge in cyber-crimes. It hampers the development of their personality and affects their studies and emotional wellbeing adversely. The findings of an online survey⁸ reveal that 93% of the boys and 62% of the girls who were studied are exposed to internet porn before the age of 18. 70% of the boys have spent more than 30 consecutive minutes looking at online porn on at least one occasion and 35% of the boys have done this on more than 10 occasions. 23% of the girls have spent more than 30 minutes looking at online porn on at least one occasion and 14% have done this on more than one occasion. 83% of the boys and 57% of the girls have watched

⁸Data was collected from the participants through an online survey. <http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cpb.2007.0179>.

the group sex on the internet. 69 % of the boys and 55% of the girls have watched homosexual activities.⁹

The use of pornographic materials generally leads the youngsters to masturbation. Depression, low self-esteem, confusion about sexuality, guilt, shamefulness and sexual problems such as erectile disability are observed among people resorting to excessive masturbation. Value erosion is dangerously felt in the present day society especially in the form of sexual and addictive behaviour of adolescents.¹⁰ A recent study conducted by Family Apostolate Training and Research Institute (2014) among the high school and higher secondary school going students in Kerala found that 93% of the students are addicted to masturbation, blue film, pornography, and 68% of them are addicted to substance abuse. In addition, 62% of the students have boyfriend-girlfriend relationships (love affairs). Premarital sexual relations among boys and girls are increasing dangerously and parents find themselves inadequate in imparting sexual education and proper guidance to their children. 65% of the Indian population is youth and their immediate reference for advice is social network and often what is received there is misguidance.

2.6. Parenting Challenges

In dealing with children parents need to be aware of the fact that every child is unique. A method that works with one may not work with another. Being a parent is not only a great challenge but also a divine vocation. Parenting requires dedication. Surely there is few nobler undertaking than responsible parenthood, preparing children to be God-fearing, happy, honourable, and productive. Parents find no greater fulfilment than to have their children honour them following their instructions. Speaking of his spiritual children in the Church, St John declared: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 Jn 1:4). In the modern society, the education, rearing, and training of children require more intelligent planning and intuitive understanding so that the children might grow up in humility, strength, wisdom, spirituality, perseverance and hard work. This is the challenge of the time. This is especially so when moral foundations of honour and decency are eroding around us. To have

⁹Chiara Sabina, Janis Wolak and David Finkelhor, "The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth," *Cyber Psychology and Behavior*, 11, 6 (December 2008), 691-693.

¹⁰Result of the study is published in the Annual Report (2013-14) of FATRI.

successful homes, values must be taught, and there must be rules and standards.

It is a fact that during adolescence, teens attempt to separate from their parents and identify more closely with their peers. The carefree ones easily trust and make friends with others from any age-group and any background. They fail to discern what is right and wrong and differentiate between what is harmful and desirous. As they are influenced and guided by these friends, all their acquired values are eroded.

Two parents united in a healthy marriage represent the best environment for rearing children. Children living in this environment are more likely to have better health, fewer behavioural and emotional problems, better cognitive and verbal development. They also experience lower dependency on welfare and enjoy better financial stability, lesser exposure to crime, lower risk of being sexually abused and less marital problems. Harmony, happiness, peace and love at home help children to cope with life's challenges.

Parental two-facedness can make children cynical and unbelieving of what they are taught at home. For instance, when the parents ask their children not to do something because it is harmful for them, if they do not follow it themselves, the parental credibility crumbles. If children are expected to be honest, parents must be honest. If children are expected to be virtuous, parents must be virtuous. Moreover, the parents should maintain a good relationship with the children that they may feel free to discuss their daily lives with their parents. Direction and discipline on the part of the parents are an indispensable part of child rearing.

2.7. Inadequate Mental Health

A person of sound mind maintains a balance between all aspects of life, like emotional, economical, spiritual as well and physical wellbeing, which is seen in how one feels and thinks about oneself and others, the quality of one's relationships, and how one faces various situations of life effectively. Those in sound mind are able to control their emotions, build and maintain relationships and recover from setbacks. They generally remain focused, flexible and creative in bad times as well as good.

Mental illness is rising around the world, including India.¹¹ WHO predicts that 20% of India's population will suffer from some form of mental illness by the year 2020. These days, several of the newly wedded men and women either have symptoms of mental disorders or are being treated for some sort of personality disorders. It is astonishing that some of these marry and are given in marriage without informing the other party of the disorder. These disorders cause marital disharmony, which often ends up in divorce and both the parties undergo its devastating impact. This causes misery and stigma and makes them more susceptible to or exacerbation of psychiatric disorders after marriage.

Mental stress, depression and other mental disorders that were previously found only in adults are now found in children too. There was a survey conducted recently on prevalence of stress among young students aged between 4 and 17.¹² This was a school-based study evaluating students of all grades from Kinder Garten to the Higher Secondary. The survey was involved selected students from seven schools in Kerala. The results indicated that 93 to 100% of the children aged between 4 and 17 showed medium to moderate stress while 1.9% severe stress. Only 1.79% of the students were found to be in complete health. This suggests that in every age-group, more than 90% of the students have stress and tension above the normal level. The observations made by many psychologists, doctors and counsellors corroborate the finding of the survey that most of the children today are facing severe stress which they find very hard to cope with.

As far as mental disorders are concerned, early intervention is one of the best solutions. However, most Indian families refuse to acknowledge that someone in the household suffers from a mental health issue because they fear the social stigma. The social stigma attached to mental health issues makes timely psychological interventions almost impossible.

3. Family Interventions and Counselling

When individuals are in a stressed or anxious mood, they are generally incapable of handling the situations adequately. In these

¹¹Samir Parikh, "Mental Health in India: A Wake-up Call" in <http://blogs.fortishealthcare.com/mental-health-india-wake-up-call>, accessed 8 October 2013.

¹²Prevalence of Stress among School Children in Kerala. Addiction and Alcohol Rehab in <http://directory.intherooms.com/articles/prevalence-of-stress-among-school-children-in-kerala>, accessed on 14 July 2014.

cases, family centred psychotherapeutic intervention is the right method employed in order to help the families in need. This therapeutic method helps them handle their varied kinds of family problems. However, often many families are at breaking point by the time they consider therapeutic interventions. Counselling and other forms of interventions are more helpful in the beginning stages of the problem, especially, if it involves premarital/extramarital relationship and mental disturbances. In case of a mental illness suffered by one of the members of family, it is not only the person who is mentally ill who requires counselling but also the caregivers in the family or the entire family as mental illness of one member almost always affects the entire family.

From a psycho-therapeutic point of view, the Indian family can be a source of the trouble as well as a support during trouble. Usually, the father of a child suffering from a mental disorder is disengaged from the family as he works and the mother is over-involved with the child. This arrangement results not only in lack of intimacy between the parents due to preoccupation with child but also in the neglect of other children's needs.

In marital relationships, problems arise when partners are intolerant of each other's differences and from lack of proper communication. Several studies have shown that the most effective ingredient in any form of couple's therapy is increasing communication skills. People are helped through counselling to understand, maintain and protect the dignity and holiness of marriage and family. In a marital counselling, when both the partners meet together and go through the process, they understand each other's defensive and behavioural reactions and cognitive and emotional patterns. This understanding helps them accept each other. It is also noted that changes in one of them bring about changes in the other.

Family Counselling enhances the couple's emotional bonds and helps them work together to achieve emotional maturity and a greater level of satisfaction. The couple who use positive strategies to deal with their relationship issues are not only better able to tackle challenges and bounce back from tough times, but they also lead a happier life. Counselling services provide a non-judgmental and supportive environment that focuses on identifying individual and family strengths. Family counselling interventions focus on ensuring that all individuals feel supported and understood.

One of the keys to successful family functioning is the family's own ability to solve problems. Knowing the real issue is winning half the

battle. In familial discords members tend to blame it on someone in the family. When your child, your parent, or your marriage partner brings a complaint, follow the advice of James: “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). Allow him/her to express fully whatever he/she feels. In Ephesians 4, we are exhorted to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God has forgiven us through Christ. In the life of Christian couples, whatever trials they experience, their love and trust in each other remain strong and provide them with a sense of safety and security contributing to happy and lasting marriages. It is the basis for the development of both psychological and sexual intimacy and the anchor of their fidelity. In his thanksgiving message to the volunteers of the World Youth Day, Pope Francis asked them to be revolutionaries to swim against the tide and “to rebel” to uphold marriage. Happy marriages don’t just happen - they are created with body, mind, heart and spirit. When it gets off the track, as all relationships tend to, from time to time, we must correct and come back on track.

4. Towards Family Stability

It is the need of the hour that the society and the Church make a concerted effort towards making modern families stable enabling them to live a more meaningful life. A few helpful tips for an effective strategy are suggested below to foster healthy family relationships ensuring the stability of the family.

1. Listening is one of the most important skills in resolving any family conflict. It requires concentration, giving space to the other person, hearing what he/she wants to say and not injecting on others your own thoughts and feelings, for “to answer before listening that is folly and shame” (Prov 18:13).
2. Understand each other. Awareness of the differences between the needs, emotional and behavioural patterns of man and woman would help couples to understand each other and thus to live a better marital life. Seek to understand what other members of the family feel or think, from their frame of reference, by listening with your ears, heart and mind.
3. Have quality time with your family. Spend time for and with each other, sharing, making fun, going out, having refreshments, etc. Make it a time that is fully set aside for paying full and undivided attention to the family. The couples who enjoy spending time together and can confide in each other usually maintain a close relationship.

4. Accept the members of the family as they are. It is in the family where they can unburden themselves and be accepted for who they are.
5. Be Proactive. The power to make a difference in your family lies within you. The place to begin is not with other members of the family, but with yourself. The focus is not on how the other person needs to change, rather on what you can do to change yourself.
6. Appreciate each other. Acknowledge the unique talents and traits that make each member of the family special. Express your appreciation for the love and support you receive.
7. Positive thinking and self-talk. Learn to think positively about the future – even when things go wrong. Positive self-talk can help one see things from a more positive perspective and give a huge boost to one's confidence. Looking on the bright side increases the ability to experience happiness in our day-to-day life while helping to cope more effectively with stress. St. Paul reminds us: "my brothers, fill your minds with those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honourable" (Phil 4:8).
8. Forget the past. Sometimes, past hurts and blunders in the marriage as well as unresolved issues are brought up unfairly in arguments. It wounds persons and affects their relationship.
9. Have faith and hope. Researches show that a person with strong spirituality and a sense of faith is happier than people who do not have anything to do with faith. Hope allows you to see the light at the end of the tunnel, helping you push through the dark and challenging times.
10. Learn effective techniques for reducing stress, such as relaxation exercises, looking at problems in a positive light, and resolving conflicts with mutual respect and care.

Certainly, our families need external support, especially if they are nuclear or single-parent families. However, it goes without saying, that there are steps that the members of the family themselves can take in order to ensure a stable family. What is given above are only a few of the building blocks of a stable family.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we have been trying to articulate the recent trends in families, the various problems that families face, and the role of family counselling in responding to these trends and issues. All have problems and situations to face each day. People face them in a variety

of ways - some with external help and others without it. Some cope and others are unable to cope. However, it is important to realize that help is available at all levels and can turn even a hopeless-looking situation around in a radical way. David Cameron, the British Prime Minister reminds us, "If we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start." Families, religious communities, community organizations and public policy makers must work together towards the great goal of strengthening marriage so that children are raised by their own mother and father in loving, lasting marital unions and in a family where there is a stable and congenial environment.