



The future of marriage

Sandra Kimball shines a light on intimate relationships

LETTERS

I've been suffering from a lengthy bout with depression and am currently receiving counseling at a local university hospital. I am also considering requesting some medication. Can you tell me something about the type of drugs that are commonly prescribed for depression in Japan and how they compare with those in the U.S.?

JOE WILSON, NISHINOMIYA

What is most commonly prescribed for depression in Japan and the U.S. are called SSRI's or "selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor" drugs that boost the amount of serotonin, a chemical believed to help regulate mood, in the brain. These anti-depressant drugs have a generic name and a brand name. Once you start with one kind of SSRI and you find it works for you, it's usually recommended not to change to another due to uncomfortable side effects. Therefore, if you plan on returning to the U.S. and want to continue with the drug you started taking in this country, check the generic name to make sure it's available in both countries. For example, I know of a few cases where people who started taking Prozac in the U.S. ran into trouble when they tried unsuccessfully to find it here in Japan and were given another drug. It's very important to remain under the care of a medical doctor or psychiatrist when taking or discontinuing the use of an anti-depressant. It's also important to talk about it with your counsellor or psychotherapist.

For most of history, it would have been considered absurd if people had chosen mates based on something as irrational as love. People have always fallen in love, but it was not always the main reason for getting married. For thousands of years, marriage served economic, political, and social functions. Couples were not supposed to put their feelings for each other above the more important commitments such as ties to their parents or responsibility to their community or religion. But around the 19th century, a new set of values that allowed for freer choice in relationships began spreading around the globe and love came to town.

When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.

This pithy statement by George Bernard Shaw heralds the contemporary idea of marriage. Many couples buckle under the strain of trying to uphold the unrealistic expectations of a cherished and modern cultural idea that marriage should be based on intense, profound love and two people should maintain their ardor until they are parted by death.

The significant gifts of a relationship are quite different from those offered by movies and top-forty songs. In Western Europe and North America, married people are generally happier, healthier and better protected against economic setbacks and psychological depression than people in any other living situation. But several studies reveal exceptions to this in Japan, where couples living outside of marriage report greater happiness.

Interestingly, when pressure to marry is high and divorce is hard to obtain or is highly stigmatized in a society, many people remain marooned in unhappy marriages. Bowing to family or societal pressure and staying in an unhappy marriage leads to more psychological distress. Women are particularly at risk in a bad marriage with higher rates of depression and alcoholism.

The benefits of marriage would disappear if we continued to insist on the "one-size-fits-all" model, or on the societal norm of lifelong marriage for everyone. In my counselling experience, I have seen non-legalized relationships work quite well. This includes same-sex couples raising children,

single-parent families, and blended families created from divorced parents. Having more choice in how we view arrangements other than marriage and social acceptance of alternatives is good for the future of marriage. So is having a more accepting attitude to divorce.

If your life journey has been fated with a committed partnership, how has the journey been so far? Has it mainly been a search for ways to endure and find patience? Are you still waiting for the love and respect from your partner that you thought was there in the beginning? Would your travel diary tell tales of active delight? Are you free of anxiety? What are you asking of your beloved that you need to be doing for yourself? Does your relationship exist simply as a cure for loneliness?

If there is no joy, communication doesn't include negotiating. If the conflicts have dragged on for too long, you can sincerely ask yourself if you have to stay together. Perhaps it's time to seek professional help to aid you in navigating a safe passage through separation and divorce.

If you want to ensure a promising future for your marriage, one with a chance of enduring, it's essential to consciously examine what assumptions and beliefs you have that may be keeping you from loving with awareness. It's not possible to assume that two people can merge all their interests and beliefs. And if you hope to change your partner to match your expectations, you are bound to fail. One starting point is to look at what you bring to the marriage, instead of whom to blame for its imperfections. Once you are free of the things that cause you to lash out or regress, what will you do with all your energy?

In couples counselling, it's sometimes not easy or even essential to predict which relationships will last, but it's apparent which ones are heading into a pit of pain and suffering. It's encouraging that more couples are reaching out to friends and counsellors for help.

Relationships based on friendship and respect, with each partner having equal validity and value are more likely to succeed. By diligently attending to the process of clearing out what obscures giving to and receiving from each other, the love for one another can lead to a richer experience of life itself. **KTO**

Sandra Kimball's next article will address international marriages in Japan. For counselling and psychotherapy, call her at Counselling Services Kyoto (075-762-6322) or contact her at www.internationalcounselling.com.