**5 Modern Myths about Love & Marriage**

**Introduction:**

Relationship coach, university instructor, and member of the Baha'i Faith, Dr. Nura Mowzoon demolishes five modern myths about love and marriage—and recommends ways to build truly lasting spiritual relationships.

Dr. Nura Mowzoon explores and explodes the myths of modern relationships: love at first sight; sexual compatibility; living together first.

Presenting studies that counter the conventional wisdom about contemporary couples, she maps a path toward the spiritual side of love and marriage and the practices that foster real and lasting love.

She advises us to "take an intentional approach" to know one another's actual character—instead of the usual dating practices of interrogating each other, going to dinner, or watching a movie. Funny, insightful, and filled with useful advice, Mowzoon challenges what we commonly believe about making marriage work and changes our ideas about what love means actually.

\*\*\*

**Dr. Nura Mowzoon:**

Bahá’u’lláh wants our hearts to burn with love for everyone who crosses our path. So we should all have love at first sight for everyone. The biggest myth is that there are different kinds of love. There's only one love, but there are just different ways of expressing it depending on context. When we look at someone, our lizard brain automatically makes an assessment of what form the attraction should take: a potential rival, a potential friend, or a potential mate.

For as long as I can remember, I have been in love with love. I would find myself talking to friends about their relationships for hours on end and not even noticing how much time had gone by. So I decided to start charging them for this. I went I got a Ph.D. in this subject, and now it's my job.

I wanted to talk to you all today about a few myths in the world of dating and marriage. Some of what I say might not be very popular. Too bad! But hopefully, it will resonate with some of

you and you will make some changes if necessary.

**Myth Number 1: Love at first sight**

We all love this idea, right? It's exciting. It makes us feel hopeful. It's a great idea. But researchers at Harvard have found that when a person is first falling in love, their brain is releasing all sorts of feel-good chemicals that are addicting. You feel attachment. You feel warmth. You feel closeness. You even feel a drive for monogamy. But what they've also found is that as you're falling in love, something else is going on that we don't really like to talk about. As you're falling in love, the part of your brain that's in charge of critical thinking and rational thought is completely dormant. It is asleep. This is why when we see friends around us - never us -- but when we see friends around us making really poor choices in who they date, we wonder what they're thinking. What could possibly be going through their minds? The truth is they're just not thinking. This is the first stage of love. It's not bad to crave this feeling or to want this feeling, but where we go wrong is when we expect to feel it right away, and if we don't feel it right away, we think that he or she isn't the one.

With this initial feeling of love, we are “goo-goo-gaga.” We think, “Oh my God, everything is awesome, and I'm so happy that I need to jump." But there's no link between this feeling and success later on. When we seek to find this feeling in the beginning, what we're actually doing is we're seeking a feeling that, by definition, is shutting off a part of our brain that makes us think critically.

When we are seeking out "love at first sight", or we're jumping from relationship to relationship because this high is addicting -- and it is an addiction for a lot of people -- when we jump from relationship to relationship, we're seeking a feeling that is actually to our detriment. It's actually causing us not to think clearly. We only hear the success stories of love at first sight, right? We're always around that really happy couple who's like, "Oh my God, I just knew! I saw her across the crowded room, and I just knew. Our hands touched …. and it was love at first sight. Nobody ever says, "I just knew, and, wow, I was dead wrong." Nobody ever says that. You don't hear those stories of, "I just knew, and I was an idiot." We only hear the success stories or the currently successful stories still to be determined. But what happens is it creates a confirmation bias. We think that love first sight is a real thing, so we look for stories that support this. "Well, oh so-and-so fell in love at first sight, and this couple just knew when they first met." So all of these stories reinforce our belief that this is how it should be. But we don't pay attention to the stories of any other way that it's happened. Maybe it's somebody that you knew for a long time, or maybe it's somebody that initially you weren't so attracted to and later on it grew. We just don't talk about it. It's always, "I just knew." The Baha'i Writings talk about love. There are a lot of Writings about love. Abdu'l-Bahá says, “Today you will see two souls apparently in close friendship; tomorrow all this may be changed...When that which has caused this ‘love’ to exist passes, the love passes also; this is not in reality love.”

When I read this makes me think that maybe what we're seeking is fascination. Love doesn't happen in a glance. I'm sorry to get scientific on you guys. It doesn't happen in a glance at all. It takes time. Maybe, it should be called being "Really, really, really hopeful at first sight.” But love takes time to build. It takes becoming thoroughly acquainted with the other person. It takes conscious effort. It takes a lot. It takes vulnerability. So it's not love at first sight. It's fascination. Maybe you got lucky, and it actually ends up being the right thing. But a lot of times it doesn't, and it's important to pay attention to that too.

**Myth Number 2: More experience is better**

The second myth is the more experience you have before marriage, the better. The more you date, the more you find out what you want. Not true. I haven't ever talked to anybody who said, "You know what? I just dated hundreds of people, and then I figured it out." I've never heard that. How do we know? Through experience and through knowing that there isn't one person who has everything packaged up.

So "the more experience you have, the better" is a really dangerous myth. It's one that is actually very rampant in our culture today. "Date around. Take your time. Don't get married right away. See what's out there." We've all heard this. I'm not saying that you should just marry the very first person that you meet. But this idea that you need experience to know what works for you is a fallacy. Our culture teaches us that the more options we have, the better. That's why websites like match and eHarmony or apps like Tinder, Bumble, are so popular -- because if you find someone who is maybe a couple of inches too short, or a couple of pounds too heavy, or maybe they like a team that rivals yours, or maybe they have a mole you don't really like, you can just swipe left or right. Because there are two or three hundred other people right behind that will fit you better-- or so you think.

Psychologist Dr. Schwartz researched the paradox of choice and what he found is that "more is not better". He found that the cultures where people have an abundance of choice and an abundance of options -- whether it's salad dressing, or Jean types, or jello -- the cultures that have the most options and the most choice, are where people are the most depressed and report the lowest satisfaction of their life. They have the lowest life quality. The cultures that have fewer choices have the happiest people, the most contented people. So more is not better, and he found choice actually leads to 3 pretty dangerous outcomes.

*Outcome number 1:* lots of choice leads to paralysis. When you have a lot of things to choose from, suddenly, you just can't choose anymore.

*Outcome number 2:* even if you're able to overcome this paralysis, you still end up less satisfied than if you had had fewer options. We keep thinking, "Ah. I would have... could have... should have…. I picked wrong. I should have swiped the other way."

*Outcome number 3:* too many choices lead to higher expectations. The more choices you have, the more expectations you have of the person that you finally pick. I was talking with a friend of mine about this, and he said it's like going to a fast-food restaurant versus going to a Cheesecake Factory. When you go to a fast-food restaurant, they basically ask, "Do you want a burger or not? Why are you wasting my time? Maybe I'll give you a grilled cheese, but move on." When you go to Cheesecake Factory, they give you a menu 83 pages thick it takes 5 minutes just to get to the main course. After a while, you're so tired of looking through this menu that eventually you say, "I don't know... just give me the shrimp. I just don't know. And then when you get the shrimp, you say, "Yeah, your's looks better." You all can relate to this, and none of you go through this fast-food restaurant. You can all relate to this. When you go to a fast-food restaurant, you get your burger, and your biggest decision is whether or not you should get french fries. It's so much easier.

Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, says, "Put away all covetousness and seek contentment; for the covetous hath ever been deprived, and the contented hath ever been loved and praised."

Covetousness is just a fancy word for greed. I'm not trying to say, don't look a little bit, but we need to find the balance between looking and becoming greedy. I would suggest that when we find someone who's great, don't think that you're just going to double down and find something greater. Find someone great, and invest in it, and make it the greatest thing for you.

It's like the cliche says, "The grass isn't greener on the other side. It's greener where you water it." I'm I can't take credit for that expression. No No. I'm actually now embarrassed to admit that I first heard it in a Justin Bieber song, but it's a real quote. I promise. I looked it up**.**

**Myth Number 3: It shouldn't be hard**

Myth number three: it shouldn't be hard. How many of you guys have heard this? When you've had a difficult time, you're going through a rough patch in your **r**elationship, and you confide in somebody, and they say, “Ah! It just shouldn't be hard. Life's supposed to be easy.” What life is supposed to be easy? I don't know about that. We live at a time where we're constantly trading in and trading up. We might have a great iPhone but when the next one comes out, we're online

waiting for that one even if your phone's still great. We want the newer car model. We want the newest fashion trends. I fear that this idea of wanting, and also not wanting to struggle

too much, is causing us to walk away whenever there's the first bump in the road because "it shouldn't be hard". Because we believe in this idea, that it shouldn't be hard, we now avoid conflict.

The other thing that we do is when we have friction in our relationship, we don't want to talk about it because we don't want to rock the boat. Dr. John Gottman is a world-renowned couples therapist who has spent decades studying couples. This man's work is unbelievable. One of the things that he's found is that when you avoid conflicts in order to keep the peace, you're actually, in the long run, harming your relationship. When we hold back, when we hold things in, we're actually depriving our partner of showing us that they're capable of weathering the storm. We might think we're keeping the peace, but we're actually creating distance. You might not be fighting, it might feel peaceful, but in that peace is a growing distance. The good news is that it doesn't matter if you have conflict or even how much of it you have. That doesn't matter. What matters is how you handle it and how you address it

Abdu'l-Baha says that "the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions." He doesn't say don't have differing opinions. He doesn't say don't clash. He's actually saying that that's how you find truth. Now it does matter how you engage in conflict. You shouldn't scream. There are a lot of don'ts, but the healthiest approach, which is reflected in the Baha'i Writings and in Gottman's research, is actually to remain as dispassionate as possible when you're talking about something tricky. Try to take your emotion out of it and just focus on the issue at hand**.**

**Myth Number 4: The pre-marriage trial run**

The next myth, the pre-marriage trial run. This is one that is very much pushed in our society. Society tells us that before you get married, test it out. See how compatible you are and then decide to get married. The two ways that we test it out are through sex and through moving in together. One of the things that people say a lot is you have to have sex with each other to see if you're compatible. We all hear this. The truth is that sexual compatibility is created. It's not discovered. It's not something that you unearth. "Oh my God. We're so compatible." No! Sexual compatibility is the result of a healthy relationship.

So even if you have mind-blasting sex in the beginning, it is not a predictor of how your sex life is going to be later because, remember, you're on a chemical high, and your brain is dead. Later on, when reality sets in because -- that chemical high only lasts between six months to two years -- it doesn't mean it's downhill from there. Your closeness to one another is what determines how sexually compatible you are. In addition to this, researchers at the University of Virginia found that the more sexual partners you have before marriage, the higher the likelihood of infidelity. They are not the first researchers to find this. This has been found and study, after study, after study.

I'm not saying this to make anybody feel guilty about any choices that they've made, but I am putting it out there for you to think about for future choices that you might make.

The second trial run that we have is through moving in together. This is a really big one. Our society is always talking about how you have to know if you can live together before you get married. The thing is that living together before marriage actually is one of the worst things that you can do. Researchers at Rutgers University did a very comprehensive review of all the data out there about this, and they found three pretty interesting points.

Number one: They found that couples who live together before marriage have a higher likelihood of divorce--not success. If you move in together before marriage, there is a higher chance of divorce. I'm not saying this to freak people out well. I'm only presenting the research to you. You can do with it what you want.

So, *Number one:* people who live together before marriage have a higher likelihood of divorce.

*Number two:* People who live together before marriage are more likely to experience violence both from their partner and towards children if there are around. Both physical and sexual violence.

*Number three:* People who live together but who are not married have lower rates of happiness than people who are married and living together. What do we do if we can't go on this trial run the way that society tells us to? What do we do? Abdu’l-Bahá says to exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other. We live in a culture where we think watching Netflix is how you get to know someone, or even just go to dinner. Why go to dinner? So you can interrogate one another? And like you're really going to give on answers about yourself like, "I'm secretly kind of nuts, but pass the bread." Nobody says that.

Instead, I would suggest that we need to take an intentional approach. How do we do that? The best way that you can get to know someone is to see them when they're really stressed out because stress is what breaks a marriage, not the happy times. That's why most couples that are on "The Bachelor" don't make it. When you only seek out the warm fuzzy times, you're only seeing them in their warm fuzzy moments. Not many divorces happen over the warm fuzzy moments. People divorce because they can't cope with stress.

What I would suggest is being more intentional and how you get to know somebody. Maybe go on a cross-country road trip where you're forced to sit in a car with them for hours on end and see how that goes. Maybe go to a country where you don't speak the language and see how you travel together. Or babysit your friends really hyperactive toddler for a few days while they're out of town. Then you get to see them when they're stressed out and how they are around kids. But I would say that we just need to be more intentional in how we get to know someone. It doesn't work through interrogation. It doesn't work through coexisting on a couch or in a movie theater. It works when you actually see

them at their worst.

I have a friend who always says she and her husband are very happily married. They always say you have to find somebody who's crazy, doesn't drive you crazy, and your crazy can coexist.

**Myth Number 5: Marriage sucks the life out of you**

The final myth, number five, is that marriage sucks the life out of you. In our culture, we are inundated with messages about how tedious marriage is. We refer to it as "the ball and chain". We talk about it as "settling down". Get everything out of your system before you settle down. Television programs revolve around couples who can't stand to be around each other. Characters constantly roll their eyes at how stupid their partner is. They're constantly scoffing at the idea of having sex together. They're just over it. This is what popular culture would have us believe about marriage. We aren't taught by our culture to look forward to marriage, to be excited about it. We're taught to dread it. But the research tells us differently. Researchers at the University of Missouri and the University of Virginia have found that married people are the happiest people. They are happier than single people, happier than widows, and happier than divorced people. They're the happiest, and they are also the most physically and emotionally healthy. They have the lowest likelihood of committing suicide.

They've also found that in the experiment, where they hook you up, and they tell you that you're about to receive an electric shock. When you're happily married, and your partner is next to you holding your hand, your brain registers that pain much better when you're happily married and holding your partner's hand, than if you're actually holding the hand of someone that you're not happily married to. So a happy marriage functions as a painkiller. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "You must irrigate continually the tree of your union with the water of love and affection, so that it may remain green and verdant throughout all seasons, producing the most luscious fruits for the healing of nations....."

I love this quote because it's telling us that marriage has the power to heal not just ourselves as individuals, but it has the power to heal the nations. Do you think that it's a coincidence that as our world seems to be falling apart, the institution of marriage is also falling apart? They're connected. Marriage is the nucleus of our society. What we have to do in order to ensure happiness is to tend to this union constantly. It's easy to think that once you're married, you're coasting, that you did all the hard work. But you can't go on cruise control when you're married. That's when the work begins, and you have to constantly irrigate your relationship for it to flourish in the way that you want. You have to intentionally connect with your spouse, intentionally be vulnerable have conversations that go deeper than just who is going to get the kids from school. You have to intentionally have sex. This is not a joke. You have to make time for it. Couples who make time for sex, even when they're exhausted and not in the greatest space, but they make time for it -- report higher levels of happiness afterward and more feelings of fondness and bonding with their partners.

I know that I've said a lot of things today that are uncomfortable. They might rattle you a

little bit. They're definitely challenging us and challenging what common society would have us believe.

But I invite you to consider what you could do differently. What could you be doing differently so that you can get what you're actually seeking.

Could you change your idea of what love actually is? Could you change the story of how it's supposed to look? Can you maybe find a balance between searching for a great fit and searching for better and better and better. Because, remember, being greedy makes you feel deprived. Being content actually leads to true happiness, so it takes courage to go against what society is telling us to do, but our society isn't happy. I'm not sure that we really should be taking society's advice.

I would encourage you to find the courage that it takes to do it differently because that courage is more than likely exactly what's going to bring you what you've been waiting for the whole time.

\*\*\*

Dr. Nura Mowzoon

an instructor at Arizona State University, teaching classes in the social sciences focusing on courtship, marriage, family life, and race and diversity issues.

**This Talk is on YouTube:**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnpUoNvJVCs&t=1s