

Making Marriage Work for Ex-Mormon/Mormon Couples
by Robert Baumgardner, M.A., MFT

I have been a casual observer of mixed religious marriages of former or unbelieving Mormons through an e-mail list and discussion board for former and unbelieving Mormons. It appears to me that unrecognized couples development issues underlie these religious struggles. In fact, from this perspective, mixed marriage couples have two tasks, each related to the other: individuating within the couple relationship while individuating from Mormonism.

In *Quest of the Mythical Mate*, by psychotherapists Ellyn Bader and Peter T. Pearson, provides a developmental model for couple relationships based on the concept that, like individuals, develop from a state of symbiosis toward a fully developed state of interdependence. The process may take years, and if successful, its culmination is characterized by partners who are able to participate fully as themselves in the world while relating intimately with one another.

Summary of Bader and Pearson's Developmental Model

Symbiotic Stage

According to Bader and Pearson's model couple relationships begin with Symbiosis. The purpose of this stage is to bond, creating a couple relationship based on the feeling and perception of "oneness." It is characterized by "falling in love," the merging of personalities, and intense bonding. As anyone who has fallen in love knows this stage feels wonderfully good and exciting. The lovers magnify similarities and overlook differences and are capable of deep passion and mutual giving. If all goes well, the individuals become a couple. (Bader and Pearson p. 9.) Challenges at this stage may include loss of identity, fear of abandonment, and fear of engulfment. Recognition and expression of differences may arouse anxiety and interactions may focus on masking them. (Bader and Pearson pp. 244-245)

Within Mormonism, "oneness" is highly valued, with oneness meaning observant Mormons are ideally in complete agreement and compliance with LDS teaching and practice. Dissonance is discouraged and sometimes punished with expulsion from the group. Because the Mormon ideal is to live as family units in the afterlife, failure to fulfill Mormon ideals is serious issue for believers. LDS psychotherapist Marybeth Raynes insightfully describes this expectation of similarity and some of its consequences:

"With a strong emphasis in the Church on finding a right and wrong way for everything, identical religious thought and action between marriage partners is encouraged. Where there are differences, one spouse must be wrong. Ironically, any church that has many criteria for goodness sets up as many points for conflict as for congruency. (This is true generally: the more areas two or more people want to share, the more areas for potential disagreement emerge. This is why friendships often work better than marriages; we sharply limit the number of concerns which overlap with our friends and often become

really close to only those with whom we agree.) We may be unwittingly sharpening a double-edged sword as we increase the number of rituals and programs a couple must share as a condition for a happy marriage." (Raynes, Marybeth. *Issues of Intimacy: A Mixed Religious Marriage*, Sunstone Magazine, March 1985, p. 40.)

Differentiation

Once the ecstasy of the Symbiotic Stage begins to diminish, the partners begin to see the relationship more objectively and they enter the Differentiation Stage. In the Differentiation Stage, the partners begin to reassert individual boundaries. Partners notice differences and may want to have time alone. At this point, if differentiation happens suddenly or cannot be tolerated by one or both partners, the relationship may end. (Bader and Pearson p. 10) Often one partner begins to differentiate before the other. Challenges at this stage may include the symbiotic partner feeling betrayed and threatened as the other partner begins to differentiate. The differentiating partner may feel guilty for the perceived betrayal and anger at the lack of recognition and acceptance of difference. (Bader and Pearson pp. 246-247)

For Mormon couples, conflicts can arise when a partner individuates from the Mormon faith as well as from the partner. Depending on the degree and kind of change, as well as the believing partner's own views and needs, he or she may feel loss and threat on several levels: personal, familial, social, and existential. Some believing partners may feel betrayed, having entered into the marriage with the understanding that the integrity of the marriage is guaranteed by a shared belief and commitment to Mormonism. The questioning of that belief and commitment may call the marriage into question as well as the integrity of the less-believing or non-believing partner.

Practicing

As differentiation proceeds, the couple enters the Practicing Stage. At this point, partners turn energy away from the relationship and toward their own needs and toward their own interests in the outside world. The defining characteristic of this stage is "I want to be me!" The partners are busy discovering themselves as individuals. They are less attuned to their partner and the relationship. Partners may become self-centered and concerned with their personal power. This stage is marked by conflict. Successful conflict resolution and negotiation skills are needed to maintain the relationship. (Bader and Pearson p. 11) Challenges at this stage are successful conflict management and maintaining empathy and emotional connection. The danger at this stage is irreparable damage to the relationship or its loss. (Bader and Pearson pp. 248-249)

For the questioning or former Mormon, this phase not only entails turning energy to other interests but can and often does entail a transformation of identity, world view, and changes in affiliation and social status. The believing partner may at this time feel frightened and betrayed and also experience an unwelcome change in status within his or her ward due to the partner's changes. The non-believing partner may also feel afraid of losing his or her family and friends and may treat the process of change as a battle that

has to be won against the partner and social community. He or she may forget that being himself or herself also entails a commitment to allow the partner to also be himself or herself, however the partner defines that, if the relationship is to survive. Because differentiation is hard-won, sometimes at great personal and social cost, a partner who is or appears to be opposing change may be quickly defined as “the enemy.”

Each partner may also seek and find sources of personal support in increased church activity or in affiliation with groups critical of Mormonism. While this move is natural and may be helpful for the individual partner, the danger is the couple will feel not only that they have little in common, but they become proxies for conflicting ideologies. Battling over ideological issues can quickly obscure and destroy the deeply personal and vital elements of friendship that underlie and support intimacy and commitment to the relationship.

To prevent or lessen the tendency to define the believing partner as “the enemy” it may be helpful for the couple to set aside or “bracket” religious issues for an agreed-upon time while working on the conflict management skills and to build their “marital friendship.” Two sets of conflict management skills are essential: The couple needs avoid behavior destructive to the relationship, especially contempt, criticism (as opposed to complaint), defensiveness, and stonewalling (“the silent treatment”). At the same time, the couple needs to recognize, develop, and use repair skills during and after conflicts to reaffirm commitment to the partner and the relationship.

Rapprochement

If things have gone well and the couple has maintained their friendship and each has developed a secure sense of identity, there is a shift again in the relationship towards intimacy and vulnerability while at the same time each partner maintains an independent identity. The relationship holds a balance between "I" and "We." Partners nurture one another consistently and are able to negotiate changes with little threat to the relationship. They can give to one another when it is inconvenient without feeling put upon. (Bader and Pearson pp. 11, 250) Challenges in this stage include finding the right balance between the needs of the individuals and the needs of the relationship. Over-compromise is the main temptation, as the cessation of conflict is pleasant. However, stress comes mainly from outside the relationship rather than from within it. (Bader and Pearson p. 250)

An issue faced by many ex-Mormons is having established a separate identity, sometimes at great cost in personal relationships and social standing, how much can be compromised for the beliefs of the partner and still maintain a sense of identity and integrity? The believing partner, of course, has the same issue. Ideally, in day-to-day practice, the couple develops mutually acceptable ways of addressing the issues presented to them by both the Mormon and non-Mormon world. The challenge is not only to avoid over-compromise but to avoid becoming engaged in ideological battles when new issues arise.

The couple will also need to recognize that every long-term, intimate relationship includes intractable problems that can be managed but not resolved. John Gottman's work, again, provides practical research-based information and exercises for doing this, such as postponing problem-solving, taking turns talking about one another's dreams within conflicts, looking for areas of flexibility where couples can work together, and supporting spouses' dreams to the degree possible. (Gottman, *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage*, chapter 5)

Mutual Interdependence

At this stage, the relationship each partner relates more fully to both the outside world and to one another, secure in the knowledge and experienced of being loved and accepted for themselves. The partners are able to reconcile the ideal and perfect with the real. They reach a stage of mutual interdependence in which two mature people relate from the basis of growth, shared interest, vulnerability, and love rather than need. (Bader and Pearson pp. 11-12.)

At this point the couple will have consciously determined how and how much of a role Mormonism will play in their relationship as a couple and for each of them as individuals. They will have largely reconciled the ideal and perfect with the real and the possible. The enjoyment of particular individuals committed to one another will take precedence over commitments to ideologies and fantasies of what "should be."

A Few Recommendations

Realize that couples relationships evolve and change, and some conflict is expected in the process. Often one partner will be in the position of changing and the other in the position of trying to "catch up." Conflict does not mean one partner is bad and the other is good or that one is necessarily right and the other wrong.

Find and focus on areas of agreement and mutual interest. Keep communication open and as much as is honestly possible, emphasize what is working, what is positive, and what you appreciate. Satisfying marriages have a positive to negative communication ratio of 5:1.

Articulate disagreement as complaints rather than criticisms. Criticisms attack character, whether of your partner or of your partner's belief system. Complaints focus on behaviors and actions rather than character. Ideally, a complaint could (and would) be presented as a request for positive action (a request to do a different behavior rather than a request to stop a behavior).

Focus on working through differences and creating situations that work for the both of you rather than fighting about "who is right." Beware of becoming a proxy for ideological positions, whether "Mormon" or "Ex-Mormon."

When you recognize you are stuck or gridlocked as a couple on an issue, set aside the question of who is right and look at *how* you are communicating rather than *what* you are communicating. It can be helpful to agree to set aside a particular issue for a mutually agreed upon amount of time to work on aspects of the relationship that *are* working.

When you do return to a difficult issue, listen closely and ask your partner about the underlying dream the issue represents. You may find you can support aspects of your partner's dream while at the same time recognizing you do not share the entire dream or your partner's methods of fulfilling it.

I highly recommend obtaining a copy of *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage*, by John Gottman, Ph.D. It is very readable and practical, and it is based on empirical research with thousands of couples. Dr. Gottman addresses the issue of what to do with intractable issues, such as those ex-Mormon/Mormon couples face (although he does not address Mormonism itself).

If you and your partner are talking about divorce or splitting up, seriously consider making an appointment with a relationship counselor you both can agree upon. Get recommendations from other people who have had good experiences working with a counselor on similar issues. The most important quality of a counselor is you both feel comfortable with the counselor and he or she is interested in helping work through your problems on your own terms.

Conclusion

Viewing relationship through a developmental lens provides a perspective that change and conflict are inherent in couple relationships is not fault of either partner. When one partner is committed to Mormonism and the other is the process of questioning and rejecting it to a greater or a lesser degree, the issues of individuation and the possibility for break-up may be acute. By becoming educated about how relationships develop, about conflict management, and about specific issues presented by the Mormon belief and lifestyle, I hope ex-Mormons and their partners will divorce less often and experience greater satisfaction in their relationships.