



Strengthening marriage through Marital Psycho-Spiritual Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the Marital Psycho-Spiritual Intervention (MP-SI), which provides the married couples and helping professionals with knowledge and skills for strengthening marriage relationships. MP-SI is an intervention that specifically developed to help Muslim married couples build a close relationship with Allah SWT, with themselves, and with their respective couples. This intervention is a structured format. In each session, the participants are exposed to the knowledge of Islamic marriage. The content of this intervention takes into account the content of the Holy Quran on man's creation, which consisted of four important elements, *nafs* (soul), *aql* (intellect), *qalb* (heart), and *ruh* (spirit). The participants are exposed to effective communication skills, worked as teams to resolve problems, managed conflicts without decreasing closeness, preserved, and enhanced attachment through communication elements, conflict resolutions, forgiveness, *sakinah* (tranquility), *mawaddah* (love with passion), and *rahmah* (mercy). This intervention may be applied in counseling and coaching interventions, as well as relationship education, couples' workshops and retreats.

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Introduction

A good marriage is a long-term process in which both partners must collaborate and be dedicated to improve themselves as individuals and as a couple. Couples need better skills and relationship knowledge to achieve marital success. In western countries, concern about how to prevent marital distress is growing, leading to a focus on teaching couples certain knowledge and skills. A variety of marriage enrichment programs aim to improve marital quality and enhance marital skills among couples. The most efficacious marriage enrichment programs are the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, Relationship Enhancement, Couple Communication Program, and Strategic Hope-Focused Enrichment (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004).

These marriage enrichment programs focus on educating and training couples on relationship knowledge, attitudes, and skills such as communication and conflict resolution (Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2003). The aims of these marriage enrichment programs are to help enhance couples' relationships (Bowling, Hill, & Jencius, 2005), reduce negative communication, and prevent destructive conflict (Halford et al., 2003). Studies have also shown that marriage enrichment programs can increase marital adjustment (Kalkan & Ersanli, 2008) and improve marital satisfaction as well as psychological well-being among couples (Pihet, Bodenmann, Cina, Widmen, & Shantinath, 2007).

In Malaysia, these types of enrichment programs are new for married couples. Currently, Muslim couples are only exposed to a premarital course conducted by Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM). This course is compulsory for all couples before they get married.

In addition, Lembaga Pembangunan Penduduk dan Keluarga Negara (LPPKN) organizes the SMARTSTART premarital program for couples who are planning to get married and for recently wedded couples. These courses are more focused on delivering knowledge and information on early marriage and marital relations rather than skill building (Huang, 2005). However, even though couples have received several lessons on these programs, some of these teachings can become out-of-date after many years of marriage (Chan & Mustaffa, 2008), implying that these courses are not effective enough at helping couples take meaningful steps to preserve their relationships and prevent divorce.

The effectiveness of marriage enrichment programs at helping married couples in western countries is likely to be beneficial for Malaysian couples as well. However, for Muslim couples in Malaysia, where religion and spiritualism are important dimensions, certain interventions such as psycho-spiritual approaches are necessary to strengthen marriage relationships (Hassan & Baba, 2008; Siti Aishah Hassan, 2011). The need for these types of interventions is based on several assumptions. First, Muslim couples need an Islamic base to strengthen marriage relationship. Second, most of human problems are caused by a lack of spiritual knowledge and practices (Kabbani, 2008). Third, studies have shown that religious involvement and spiritual practices have a positive impact on marriage relationships (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

Based on these assumptions, there is a need for psycho-spiritual interventions to provide the knowledge and skills that can encourage Muslim couples in Malaysia to achieve a blessed marriage. In addition, this kind of intervention is expected to help Muslim couples gain peace and tranquility in the world and the hereafter, as stated in the Holy Quran:

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"And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts); verily in that are Signs for those who reflect." (Ar Rum, 21)

An Islamic psycho-spiritual approach is seen as a preventive approach to help Muslim couples improve and enhance their relationships as well as overcome marital conflicts. This intervention can be a platform to reduce divorce rates among Muslim in Malaysia which is frightfully increasing every year. Through psycho-spiritual interventions, couples are convinced that their marital problems can be prevented and their marriage life can be enhanced by learning and implementing the teachings of Islam. According to Kabbani (2008), the Holy Quran and *Sunnah* of the Prophet SAW are practical tools for spiritual development that can be used to prevent and resolve the many problems of human life. Through this intervention, Muslim couples are provided with spiritual practices in order to ensure that their marriage is an *ibadah* (worship) of Allah SWT. For that purpose, this article discuss a psycho-spiritual intervention namely as Marital Psycho-Spiritual Intervention (MP-SI) as an intervention for blessing marriage relationships.

Overview of Marital Psycho-Spiritual Intervention (MP-SI)

MP-SI integrates both psychological growth and Islamic spiritualism in order to strengthen couples' relationships. This intervention is specifically developed to help Muslim couples build good relationships with Allah SWT, with themselves, and with their spouse. It is an approach that integrates knowledge and skills based on the knowledge of the Holy Quran and the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. These two sources are highlighted in this intervention to increase spiritual development among Muslim in enhancing their marriage relationships. The MP-SI focuses on the concept of *ibadah* (worship) in marriage.

The content of this intervention takes into account the views of the Holy Quran on human creation and comprises spiritual and material elements, such as *qalb*, *aql*, *nafs*, and *jasd*. *Qalb* is the spiritual entity of heart that contains feelings, intuitions, and emotions that manifested through human actions. *Qalb* has been considered as the center of human's change. *Aql* is the ability to acquire knowledge. Through *aql*, human being would be able to think and to understand the meaning of live and to function according to the nature. It helps man to differentiate the truth from the false and to make wise life decision based on the Islamic teaching. *Nafs* is a dimension of self. It corresponds with the function of *aql* and *qalb* to represent human being as a whole. The *nafs* has to be nurtured and build based on the Divine guidance. In the Holy Quran, Allah SWT has explained 3 main types of the *nafs*, which were ranked from poor to better: *an-nafs al-ammarah* (the commanding self), *an-nafs al-lawwamah* (the blaming self), and *an-nafs al-mutma'innah* (satisfying self or the self at peace.). *Ruh* is considered as an essence of human being. It is the manifestation of a Divine existence in human body, which Allah SWT blow His spirit into the man, as mentioned in the Holy Quran, "When I have made him and have breathed into him of my spirit" (15: 29). These elements are interrelated and thereby all influence human behavior.

Among the four elements, the most important element is the *qalb*. It is an axis or the centre of change in humans. This

was stated by the Prophet SAW in a *hadith*, "Truly in the body there is a morsel of flesh which, if it be sound, all the body is sound and which, if it be diseased, all of it is diseased. Truly it is the heart". Therefore, this element is emphasized in process of helping husbands and wives get closer to Allah SWT and become good Muslim couples. Husbands and wives in the MP-SI are exposed to the method of *tazkiyatun nafs*. This is a process of purifying the soul from *mazmumah* (bad) traits to *mahmudah* (good) traits to increase human relationships with Allah SWT (Hawwa, 2001). Allah SWT has mentioned the importance of this process in the Holy Quran, "Truly he succeeds that purifies it, And he fails that corrupts it!" (91: 9 & 10).

In marriage context, these verses can be understood that the successful of relationship between husbands and wives in this world and the hereafter should come through the process of *tazkiyah* (purification), and the failure of their relationship comes through of their *nafs* (soul). Through the process of *tazkiyatun nafs*, the human's *qalb* could be purified. Because of the *qalb* is an axis of human's change, it determine the quality of *aql* and *nafs*. A good *qalb* permits *aql* to think in a positive way which will eventually lead to an increase in *nafs*, (from *an-nafs al-ammarah* stage to *an-nafs al-lawwamah* and finally to *an-nafs al-mutma'innah*). At the *an-nafs al-mutma'innah* stage, husbands and wives will enjoy peace and happiness in this world and in the hereafter. Further, the concept of marriage as a form of *ibadah* (worship) to Allah SWT can be achieved at this stage.

A Development of the Marital Psycho-Spiritual Intervention (MP-SI)

Description of the MP-SI

The MP-SI is a psychoeducational group that emphasizes the importance of religion and spiritual practices in the Muslim marriage relationships. In line with the objective of guidance and counseling services, psychoeducational group helped to increase participants' self-worth. This kind of group is simply referred as an educational groups or guidance groups (Gladding, 2008). Regardless of their name, "psychoeducational group work emphasizes using education methods to acquire information and develop related meaning and skills" (Brown, 1992, p. 1). They can be preventive, growth oriented or remedial in their purpose.

MP-SI is an intervention that highlighted the knowledge of the Holy Quran and the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH to increase spiritual development among Muslim spouses as a way to be a good husbands and a good wives. Four important elements in Islamic human nature as abovementioned were emphasized in the MP-SI. Among these four elements, *qalb* was stressed as the important element to spiritual improvement among husbands and wives in this intervention. It is because many cases of marital problems highlighted in this study due to the spiritual problems.

Thus, healing of one's *qalb* is seen as critical in ensuring a peaceful life without any emotional troubles or conflict. For that purpose, participants in the MP-SI were exposed with the methods of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul). *Tazkiyatun nafs* is a process of purifying the soul from *mazmumah* traits (bad traits) to *mahmudah* traits (good traits) in order to increase human relationship with Allah SWT (Hawwa, 2001). The methods of *tazkiyatun nafs* were stressed in this intervention and spiritual practices such as prayers, *zikr*, fasting, recitation of the Holy Quran, and other good deeds were highlighted.

Besides teaching and exposing the knowledge on the importance of purification of the soul, this intervention also taught spouses on skills and attitudes related to marriage relationships. The content of MP-SI consisted of twelve topics which includes topics of Islamic marriage concept, practical means of *tazkiyatun nafs*, communication, marital conflict, forgiveness, and the elements of *sakinah* (tranquility), *mawaddah* (love of passion), and *rahmah* (mercy). These topics help participants to cope effectively with marital conflicts, strengthen marriage relationship, and finally helps improve their personality, communication, and attachment.

Content Validity of the MP-SI

The MP-SI was developed by the researcher. The content validity of MP-SI was evaluated to ensure the content represents and meets the specific area of studies. Four panel experts were selected to validate the MP-SI. They are three panels' experts from Universiti of Malaya, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and Universiti Utara Malaysia who are experts in their fields and have ample psycho-spiritual knowledge. Besides, the content of this intervention also was validated by the religious officer from *Jabatan Agama Islam Kedah* (Kedah Islamic Religious Department) who has knowledge in Islamic marriages and experiences in handling marital cases. An evaluation was conducted to ensure that the content of the MP-SI represents and includes the elements of psycho-spiritual in marriage relationships.

The evaluation on the content validity of MP-SI, takes into account five criteria of content validity proposed by Russell (1974); the target population, the method of execution, allocation of time, the ability to enhance the performance, and the ability to change towards a more positive attitude. Five items were formed to evaluate the content validity of the MP-SI by the panel experts for this study. Table 1 shows the coefficient value of the content validity for MP-SI based on the five items. Based on the evaluation by the panel of experts, the MP-SI has a content validity coefficient of .81. It shows that this intervention has good content validity. The value of this coefficient was obtained by calculating the total score given by the panel experts divided by the maximum score and multiplied by 100.

Table 1. The content validity coefficients for MP-SI

No.	Items	Content Validity Coefficient
1	The content of MP-SI fulfils the target population	.90
2	The content of MP-SI can be properly implemented	.80
3	The content of MP-SI is in accordance with the time allocated	.85
4	The content of MP-SI can help spouses achieve the objective	.85
5	The content of MP-SI fulfill the psychospiritual concept	.81
	Overall content validity	.81

Implementation of the MP-SI

The MP-SI was conducted by the researcher and was observed by a religious officer from *Jabatan Agama Islam Kedah (JAIK)*. As mentioned earlier, MP-SI is a psychoeducational group that can be conducted through guidance and counseling services. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), a psychoeducational groups are short term, mostly cognitive-behaviorally oriented, and based on learning from information or training in new skills.

The psychoeducational group conducted in this study was a structured format with well-organized and structured activities. Overall there are 12 topics were delivered to the participants in 6 sessions (2 topics per sessions). Each session lasted 2 hours. The facilitator presented the educational material in a lecture format with accompanying power point slides, and informal discussion.

Through 12 sessions in the MP-SI, the participants were exposed to the knowledge of Islamic marriage, effective communication skills, worked as teams to resolve problems, managed conflicts without decreasing closeness, preserved, and enhanced attachment through communication elements, conflict resolutions, forgiveness, *sakinah* (tranquility), *mawaddah* (love with passion), and *rahmah* (mercy). Knowledge and skills taught in this group help the participants to achieve self-direction, self-knowledge and self-realization which are the most important objectives in the guidance and counseling services.

The psychoeducational group conducted in this study has an important role in guidance and counseling services. The amount and mixture of group content and group process in the MP-SI sessions make psychoeducational group dynamic. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2005), groups are dynamic entities that have a direct and indirect impact on their members. Jacobs, Masson, and Harvill (2009), refers the terms group process and group dynamics to the attitudes and interaction of group members and leaders. It involves the interaction and energy exchange between members and leaders, how the leader reacts to the members, and how the members talk to one another and the leader.

In the MP-SI sessions, the process of group enables interaction among participants and allows them to learn new knowledge and skills. Group discussion during the MP-SI sessions provides opportunities to free opinion exchange, discusses common problems experienced in their marital life and gain good attitudes from the other participants in the group. Besides, it helps to improve them developmentally and serve as a preventive measure to ensure continues adjustment and personal improvement in their personality, communication, and attachment.

Nims (1998) reported that "groups are valuable because they allow members to experience a sense of belonging to share common problems, to observe behaviors and consequences of behaviors in others and to find support during self exploration and change" (p. 134). In regards to this, the MP-SI sessions has the capacity to provide participants with an experience of belongingness. The participants in MP-SI have the opportunity to feel a part of a social group, which is one of the essential needs as human being. The topics, objectives, and the contents delivered for each session in the psychoeducational group of MP-SI are briefly described as follows.

First Session

In the first session, the facilitator explained the outline and structure of the MP-SI, objectives of the intervention, the topics to be taught for each session, the duration of the intervention, and the benefits that participants would achieve. The nature of intervention was also clarified to the participants. Then, each participant was requested to introduce themselves to the groups in order to get to know each other and built a rapport amongst them. The participants were convinced that they would achieve their dream marriage through the MP-SI.

Two topics were discussed in this session. The first topic was an introduction to marriage. Several issues pertaining to marriage and the dissolution of relationships were discussed. Participants were asked to state their goals in marriage and discussed the factors related to divorces especially among Muslim spouses. Then, the facilitator explained the divorce factors among Muslims based on divorce statistics. A divorce factors such as husbands neglecting responsibilities towards their wives and families and lack of understanding between spouses were discussed. During the discussion on this topic, the facilitator stressed on the lack of spiritual practices as the main reason for the current increase of divorce rates among Muslim spouses.

In the second topic, the participants were exposed to the concept of Islamic marriage. The objective of this topic was to let participants know and understand the concept of marriage in Islam, the role, and responsibility of husbands and wives that Islam has identified. The concept of marriage in Islam was explained based on three verses in the Holy Quran which emphasized the purpose of life and marriage is to worship Allah SWT (Holy Quran, 51:56), to increase the population of the Muslims (Holy Quran, 4:4), and to achieve happiness and tranquility in the world and the hereafter (Holy Quran, 30:21). Then, the role and responsibility of husbands and wives were discussed. The role of husbands as leaders in families was emphasized as stated in the Holy Quran (4:4).

Second Session

In the second session, the participants were explained the importance of *ilmu* (knowledge), *amal* (practices), and *iman* (faith) to achieve the objectives of the Islamic marriage. To discuss this topic, the participants were asked to recall the knowledge of the previous session. The facilitator explained the meaning of these three elements and then discussed their interrelations and importance towards marriage relationships. Each participant was urged to use and practice the knowledge from the Holy Quran and the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH to build and enhance their relationships with spouses and finally to increase their level of faith.

The participants were then exposed to the role of *qalb* (heart) in the individual personality development. A video clip was shown to the participants in explaining the main reasons of many marital problems. It was then followed by a discussion regarding on the role of the heart as the “king” who controls and influences all emotions and human behaviors and the main reason for conflicts in marriage relationships. The *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad PBUH and verses in the Holy Quran (91: 9-10) pertaining to the importance of the human heart were elaborated. The facilitator then requested the participants to discuss on how the diseased heart such as doubt, suspicion, deviance, heedlessness, and oppression influenced their relationships with their respective spouses. The participants were reminded to control themselves from these diseases. This was because the quality of the heart determined the personality of husbands and wives, whether good or bad. Then, the interrelation between *nafs*, *aql*, *qalb*, and *ruh* in human personality development was briefly discussed.

Third Session

The facilitator summarized the content of the previous topics and asked the participants to give their own opinion on how to prevent marital conflicts due to diseases of the heart. The facilitator then introduced the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul). This is the process of purifying the soul from *mazmumah* traits (bad traits) to *mahmudah* traits

(good traits). The facilitator explained the importance of this concept based on the verses in Holy Quran (91:910) and its needs in marriage relationships. The participants, then were explained the method of purification of the soul such as prayers, *zikr*, recitation of the Holy Quran, supplication, and several good deeds. The verses in the Holy Quran were used to explain and discuss the need for prayers (29:45), *zikr* (13:28; 2:152), supplication (2:186), and recitation of the Holy Quran (17:82). The objective of this topic was to make sure participants knew the process of purification of the soul was important and would help husbands and wives have good relationship with Allah SWT, with themselves, and with their spouses. Besides, these methods would assist the participants to become good spouses.

Communication which is an important element in any marriage relationship was discussed. The objectives of this topic were to let participants know and understand the meaning of communication and its importance in marriage. In this topic, participants were explained on four types of negative communication that can be detrimental to the relationships among spouses. The four types of negative communication such as escalation, invalidation, demand and withdrawal, and negative interpretations were elaborated. The participants were asked to share their experiences when faced with these types of communication and the impact of these communications on the couple’s relationship was discussed.

Fourth Session

In the fourth session, the participants were explained on how to handle negative communication as discussed in the previous session. The topic of non-verbal communication also was emphasized in order to increase the closeness between husbands and wives. For the topic; “ways to handle negative communication”, the participants were asked to share the factors in negative communication that occur in daily life. Then, the facilitator explained several verses in the Holy Quran (2:83 & 263; 17:53) pertaining to communication. These verses were used as a tool to overcome negative communication in marriage relationships. Handouts containing a dialog of negative communication were distributed to the participants. The participants were asked to use their knowledge and experiences to solve the negative communication between a husband and a wife in the dialog. Then, the participants were shown the right way to overcome negative communication based on knowledge in the Holy Quran. The ways Prophet Muhammad PBUH overcame negative communications with his wives were discussed.

The next topic in this session, the role of non-verbal communication was highlighted. This topic was selected in order to increase a close relationship among husbands and wives. The facilitator explained the meaning of non-verbal communication and its importance in marriage relationships. The 20 ways of non-verbal communication that was practiced by Prophet Muhammad PBUH with his wives was discussed. The participants were requested to share their personal experiences of non-verbal communication in their marriage relationships. In the conclusion, the facilitator urged the participants to practice non-verbal communication based on the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

Fifth Session

In the fifth session, the participants were exposed to marital conflicts and the effective ways to solve them. A video clip was used to show the conflict that occurs in marriage relationships. The meaning of marital conflict and factors of conflict in marriage relationships were explained.

The facilitator then discussed the factors of marital conflict and their impact on relationships between husbands and wives. The participants were asked to share their experiences and gave their personal opinion pertaining to these issues. Several *hikmah* or positive effects of conflicts in marriage relationship were discussed.

The facilitator then introduced the steps to solve conflicts in marriage. This topic was related to the first topic in this session. The participants were asked with a simple question "Who should solve the conflict, the husband or the wife?" To answer this question, the facilitator guided and provided the participants with the verses in the Holy Quran (4:4) which mentioned the role and responsibility of a husband. Then, the facilitator discussed the effective ways to solve conflicts in marriage. The concept of *syura* (discussion) was introduced as a key to solve any marital conflict. The meaning and its importance was explained. The facilitator used the knowledge in the Holy Quran (3:159; 42:38) and the *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad PBUH to explain this concept. The participants were then exposed to the steps to solve the conflicts. Besides, they were reminded to face and handle the marital conflicts with patience and prayers (Holy Quran, 2:152), supplication (Holy Quran, 40:60), and *tawakkal* (surrender to Allah SWT) (Holy Quran, 65:3).

Sixth Sessions

In the last session, the facilitator introduced the topic on forgiveness. The objective of this topic was to enhance the understanding of the concept of forgiveness. The importance of forgiveness in marriage such as to gain the pleasure of Allah SWT, to achieve happiness in the world and the hereafter, and to purify the soul from sins were discussed. Several verses in Holy Quran (4:149; 24:22; 26:43) were explained to increase the participants' understanding on forgiveness. Several steps of forgiveness were highlighted. The participants then were reminded to always forgive their spouses.

The last concepts for this session were *sakinah* (tranquillity), *mawaddah* (love with passion), and *rahmah* (mercy). These are the importance elements that were highlighted in the Holy Quran (30:21). The meanings of these elements were explained using simple examples for elaboration. The facilitator then discussed the things that husbands and wives should do to ensure their marriages have these three elements. The suggestions were as follows:

- i) Understand the purpose of human life and the purpose of marriage in Islam based on the Holy Quran (51:56).
- ii) Get closer to Allah SWT and practice the method of *tazkiyatun nafs*.
- iii) Learn the knowledge of Islamic marriage.
- iv) Practice the knowledge in the Holy Quran and the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad PBUH in marriage.

Conclusion

This article emphasized the goal of Islamic marriage is to worship Allah SWT in order to gain happiness in the world and in the hereafter. This goal cannot be achieved without knowledge and practicing and disseminating the knowledge of Islam are key ingredients to prevent problems in marriage life. Commonly, most of spouses who have experienced marital difficulties tend to associate their problems with the factors of communication, financial problem, and failure in conflict resolution. It is very rare to relate the marital conflict with religion. However, the present article emphasized that many marital problems that occurred among Muslim in

Malaysia nowadays were caused by a lack of Islamic spiritual practices such as *solat* (prayer). Therefore, this article brings awareness that to build a happy and blessing relationship, Muslim couples should get closer to Allah SWT and practice spiritual practices prescribed by the Islamic religion. Besides that, this article is an attempt to emphasize that everyone who wants to be good husbands and good wives should have knowledge, and most importantly, should practice the knowledge of Islam. This knowledge can be obtained from various sources and one of the sources is through the intervention as suggested in this article which is Marital Psycho-Spiritual Intervention.

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