

# Reflecting the potential role of family counselling in addressing emotional issues in Afghan youth

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## Abstract

Working with family conflicts can be a challenging task for counsellors. In a collectivist society, such as Afghanistan, where interactions between people of the opposite sex are highly regulated, counselling sessions with an individual involved in a family conflict may not be very effective unless conducted in a culturally sensitive manner. As asking for help from professionals may be considered to be 'lunatic', as well as a potential threat to the honour of the family, family counselling is not often easy to carry out and may actually pose risks to the client and to the counsellor. Therefore, family counselling is likely to be more effective if counsellors team up with respected members of the community, such as social workers and religious leaders, to deliver family counselling.

**Keywords:** Counselling, family conflict, safety

## CASE STUDY: HOW FALLING IN LOVE CAN BECOME A REASON FOR SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Being involved in a love relationship in adolescence and/or young adulthood is a common thing in most developed and democratic countries. However, there are countries in which having such a relationship – for some groups in society – is forbidden and considered evil. Afghanistan is just such a country. Many adolescents and young adults in Afghanistan are expected to enter into a marriage arranged by their parents, regardless of their feelings about the proposed partner.

As a counsellor working with adolescents and young adults, it is my experience that despite the restrictive attitude of the people around them, young adults and adolescents do fall in love, posing a problem to them and their family life. It is at this point that some young people turn to a counsellor. In one such case, a 20-year-old girl who was studying at the university approached me for help as an accredited counsellor working in student well-being services at Kabul University. She looked sad and vulnerable, and told me that her academic performance had deteriorated recently and that she had lost interest in studying. Then she started crying and told me what was bothering her: she had fallen in love with her maternal cousin, but her parents had (without her consent) already arranged her engagement to her paternal cousin. She was very angry with her family, especially her father, for making this decision and not listening to her. She felt

helpless and disappointed. She told me that the maternal cousin, her boyfriend, was an understanding, well-educated and open-minded person, and she was sure that he loved her and had spoken about the future together. When I asked her what she thought I could do for her, she said, '*Get me out of this. Help me to find a way to get around this arranged marriage and reach the person I love.*'

## WHAT COULD BE DONE?

To deal with her problems, she had spoken to the fiancé her family had arranged and told him she did not love him. Her fiancé, however, urged her to ignore her feelings and had emphasised that he respected their families' decision and would not end the engagement. She also had tried to seek her mother's support and asked her to convince her father that this marriage would not be good for her. However, her mother did not take her feelings seriously and said she was unable to do anything as her father had more power and was the decision-maker for the family. Talking to her father, she told me, was not an option as, in Afghan culture, talking to your father about these issues is considered an immoral act of disobedience.

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10.4103/INTV.INTV\_24\_18

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**How to cite this article:** Ayubi, B. (2018). Reflecting the potential role of family counselling in addressing emotional issues in Afghan youth. *Intervention*, 16(3), 269-270.

During the few sessions we had, I tried to help her by providing a safe space to vent her emotions. I also tried to discuss her problem as a dilemma, a choice between two evils: accepting her father's decision, or being disobedient and creating problems within her family. We explored the pros and cons of both options. After three individual counselling sessions, her situation had not changed, and her complaints and symptoms (concentration problems when studying, extreme fatigue) had not improved. Following this, and under family pressure, she left the university, thereby also discontinuing counselling. Had I been able to have more counselling sessions with her, another option was to help her to become more active, as her (negative) coping strategy was staying at home in bed as much as possible. Unfortunately, we were not able to try this third option.

## DISCUSSION

In other cultural settings, family counselling may have been indicated in such a situation as an alternative to individual counselling and would involve key members of the family. This might also provide a powerful opportunity to de-escalate the family conflict. However, as the client was seeking help without informing her family, and she did not agree to ask her family to join the counselling sessions, this was also not an option. In her culture, having a romantic relationship, especially for girls, is not allowed and is considered to bring shame to her family. This is especially true if an outsider, such as a counsellor, knew about it.

One option, which may make involving key family members a more feasible option, is to raise societal awareness to de-stigmatise help seeking for emotional problems. Of course, solving this issue requires more complex ways to deal with cultural and contextual barriers to care seeking and attitudes, but it would create an opportunity for the

family to gain insight into their dilemma and the pros and cons attached to it. Such interventions would also be more feasible in a team including both male and female counsellors, social workers and religious leaders as respected community members.

Upon reflection, even if family sessions were an option, I would have been quite nervous to speak to her father as he was a well-known individual with high status. This intimidated me. In retrospect, I do not believe that individual counselling would have been effective had she continued. One reason is that I was reluctant to explore ways for her to get help from governmental and non-governmental organisations working for women rights because, personally, I could not see past the negative consequences of this sort of action, nor see a solution to the situation myself. Furthermore, it could have resulted in the client's family blaming me if the client stood up to their decisions, leading the family to potentially take action against me. I felt that just helping the client to become more assertive within the family could even put my life at risk. This is not a problem faced only by me but could be a problem for many counsellors working in Afghanistan. To deal with this threat, it is necessary that professionals team up and establish an active association of counsellors through which the law and systems would support counsellors dealing with such cases. Having the support and assistance of religious leaders and social workers may also help counsellors gain access to families or family members seeking help.

## Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.