

Nearly half considered divorcing their spouse, survey shows

Kezia Toh

The Straits Times, 12 December 2012

NEARLY half the respondents in a new marriage survey conducted recently said they have considered divorcing their spouse at some point.

But none went ahead eventually, because of a sense of commitment to marriage and the influence of family, friends and religious advisers. Some were also worried that their children would be affected badly by a divorce.

The study of more than 500 married individuals and marriage counsellors in Singapore was commissioned by Marriage Central, an agency under the National Family Council. Headed by Dr Mathew Mathews of the Institute of Policy Studies, it aimed to uncover what keeps marriages here resilient.

The results were gleaned from in-depth interviews and self-administered surveys conducted from February to May.

The survey found that the top stress factors in a marriage included extramarital affairs, problems with in-laws and disagreement over issues such as parenting.

Couples who professed to contemplating divorce also tended to have heated arguments during which they left their home. They were also less able to forgive the other party immediately.

But Ms Anita Fam, chairman of Marriage Central's advisory board, feels the survey results should not set off alarm bells.

"I think people are being honest, and it is just a thought that they entertain... but it does not mean that they act on it," she said.

Instead, it reflects the strong commitment couples have to make things work. Otherwise, divorce rates in Singapore would have shot up, she said.

The number of divorces and annulments last year was 7,604, slightly up from 7,338 in 2010 and 7,280 the year before.

What keeps marriages going strong? The support of family, friends and religious advisers that couples turn to in troubled times, said Dr Mathews.

Children are also an important reason for couples to continue their marriage. Couples also had to be sufficiently motivated to plough on, and this comes from pleasant memories of happier times and a belief that marriage involves sacrifice.

Couples with prior positive interactions with counsellors, such as in marriage preparation programmes, also stand a better chance at overcoming crises.

But marriage counsellors surveyed said couples usually turn to them at a late stage in their conflict, making progress difficult. They also pull out of counselling prematurely whenever they see some improvement, and do not work through root issues.

The findings have been shared with voluntary welfare organisations and other stakeholders.

The survey's researchers recommended starting training programmes for marriage "first-aiders" - family and friends whom couples turn to in troubled times.

Marriage preparation programmes could also include a complimentary post-marriage counselling session within the first six months of marriage, to get couples to discuss teething problems early.

Another suggestion is to have counselling centres provide more information on how they work with couples on their websites, so that couples may make a more informed decision.

Ms Fam said: "The counsellors may be doing their jobs but don't realise that for the couples, it is like finding the right fit, much like finding the right GP."