

Half of survey respondents had thought of divorce

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SINGAPORE - About half the respondents in a survey of married individuals here have considered divorce at some point.

While the finding appears startling, amid rising divorce rates over the past decade, counsellors and observers noted that it reflected reality as people become more open to acknowledging and talking about marriage problems. At the same time, it underlined the resilience of marriages here given that the respondents did not eventually go down that path, they said.

The survey, which involved 408 married individuals in total, was commissioned by Marriage Central - a work group under the National Family Council - and conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

It was part of a study that aimed to find out "resilience factors that can mitigate marriage crises, as well as acceptance towards the use of social service interventions for marital problems", according to Marriage Central.

IPS research fellow Mathew Mathews, who led the study, noted the survey's small sample size and said it was not meant to be representative of the state of marriages here.

Between February and May, in-depth interviews were conducted on 85 couples and 15 spouses. The researchers found from these that a "good proportion" of this group had contemplated divorce at some point during marriage. This prompted them to conduct a self-administered survey with 108 of the initial respondents, as well as another 300 married persons - from various ages, racial and religious backgrounds - via door-to-door visits.

The result: Almost 52 per cent of the total number of married persons surveyed had considered divorce at some point.

According to the study, common marital stressors were interference by in-laws, sexual impropriety and infidelity, communication and personality difficulties as well as misaligned priorities and different aspirations.

Marriage Central Chairperson Anita Fam said: "The findings from this study, especially the stories of couples who went through very challenging periods but persisted in working on their marriages, show that there is hope for troubled marriages."

Ms Celine Edmund, a marriage counsellor at Singapore Counselling Centre, said she was not surprised at the findings.

"All these marriage problems have been ongoing for a long time - only (the subject) has always been a taboo," she said. "It is coming to the surface because people are more willing to talk about it now."

Nevertheless, she said that "more people still need to know that there is nothing wrong with seeking marriage counselling".

Jalan Besar GRC Member of Parliament Lily Neo, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Social and Family Development, said she was initially surprised by the survey findings but pointed out that, "despite considerations of divorce, these marriages stayed committed and resilient".

Among other things, the study found that family, friends and religious advisors are often primary informal sources of help that couples reach out to when faced with marital issues. It also found that couples opt for counselling too late into their conflict "which makes progress through counselling difficult".

It recommended that training opportunities be made available for family and friends of couples whose marriages are on the rocks. One complimentary post-marriage counselling session should also be included in marriage preparatory packages, the study suggested.

Ms Edmund felt that the cost of counselling - which can go up to more than S\$100 per hour at private counselling centres - could deter couples from seeking help.

But Ms Chong Cheh Hoon, who heads Marriage Central's Family Education and Promotion Division, pointed out that voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) offer counselling services at affordable rates.

The fees are even waived at some VWOs, depending on the couples' monthly household income, she said.

Ms Chong noted that the imposition of a fee helps to ensure that the couples are committed to undergo counselling.

Compared to a decade ago, the general divorce rates last year were significantly higher.

The rate for males rose from 6.3 in 2001 to 7.6 last year, while that for females climbed from 6.4 in 2001 to 7.2 last year.