As part of the Orthodox Union’s ongoing commitment to strengthen the Jewish family, the OU recently conducted an online international survey on marital satisfaction in the Orthodox community. The anonymous Aleinu Marital Satisfaction Survey, which took place from January to March 2009, targeted the Orthodox community and focused upon the many facets of marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The survey was coordinated in conjunction with Aleinu Family Resource Center, a program of the Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles and the Rabbinical Council of California. Raw data were collected by OTX, a California institute of the behavioral sciences. The study expanded upon a similar project conducted in March 2008 by Deborah Fox, director of Aleinu Family Resource Center at Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles.

The OU survey, organized by Frank Buchweitz, OU national director, community services and special projects, broadened the original inquiry, with questions regarding the impact of such issues as at-risk children, infertility and birth control. The OU, which has sponsored numerous marriage retreats on both the East and West Coasts, will use the results to create new programming aimed at strengthening marriages and families within the frum community.

Dr. Eliezer Schnall, assistant professor of psychology at Yeshiva College, and Dr. David Pelmovitz, Straus professor of psychology and education at Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, both of whom were responsible for analyzing the data, explain the findings and their implications in the pages ahead.
The survey attracted 3,760 respondents from around the world, a large number relative to similar studies of marriage and family. The vast majority of the respondents—83 percent—were from North America, mostly from the United States. Some 11 percent were from Israel. Of the total respondents, 59 percent were women and 41 percent were men.

When asked to rate their marriages overall as “Excellent,” “Very Good,” “Good,” “Fair” or “Poor,” 72 percent of men and 74 percent of women rated their marriages as “Very Good” or better. In contrast, only a small minority—about 13 percent—responded that their marriages were “Fair” or “Poor.” Indeed, many studies—for example, data from the National Survey of Families and Households—indicate that frequent participants in religious services or activities experience greater marital contentment, and may even have lower risk of divorce, compared with others. In fact, almost 80 percent (of both men and women) in our sample said that their spouses meet their expectations. Furthermore, in a similar question, respondents were asked whether they would marry the same person if they could “turn back the clock,” knowing all that they do now. Most wives and husbands will be happy to hear that so many (74 percent) of their spouses would marry them all over again if they could.

Debra Umberson, a professor at the University of Texas, recently wrote that “as early as the 1950s, sociologists concluded that marital quality diminishes following the birth of the first child, and does not begin to improve until children leave the parental home.” Many in the academic world have taken note of this roller-coaster-like continuum of marital satisfaction, calling it a “U-shaped curve,” with the happiest subjects being newlyweds and those married for thirty years and longer. Norval Glenn, also of the University of Texas, referred to this U-shaped finding with this strong statement: “It’s as close to being certain as anything is in the social sciences.” Our study of Orthodox Jews, although cross-sectional, may be con-
sistent with these findings. Those married only one to two years, for example, reported higher marital satisfaction than those married ten to twenty or twenty to thirty years. (See graph on page 32.) However, those married thirty or more years reported higher satisfaction than those married twenty to thirty years.

Obviously, all is not rosy. Within Orthodox marriages there are certain stressors. What are they? Research on the general secular community has identified certain areas where conflict is common: children, money, household tasks, time, sexual issues, in-laws, and whether to have a child or to have another child. What were the most common in our Orthodox sample? The five areas most commonly identified as extremely or somewhat stressful were financial issues, lack of communication, problems with intimacy, lack of relationship or time together and conflicts with in-laws. Other problems that were identified include excessive time on the Internet, a twenty-first-century problem, and the use of “inappropriate Web sites,” a new manifestation of an age-old issue. Both of these problems seemed more stressful to those earlier in their marriages, as did decisions about use of birth control and dealing with possible infertility. Later in marriages, stressors such as family illness or behavioral problems with “off-the-derech” children were more prominent.

What about some other ways of breaking our sample into subgroups? Respondents with household incomes between $25,000 and $50,000 reported significantly less stress from an “off-the-derech” or “at-risk” child compared with those earning $100,000 or above. This may be consistent with other research identifying higher risk among more affluent adolescents. Those divorced and now remarried also identify more stress from “off-the-derech” children than those in a first marriage.

Moreover, while conflicts with in-laws tend to be more problematic in first marriages, financial issues come to the fore more prominently in cases where there was a divorce and a remarriage. Ba’alei teshuvah report greater mar-

Most commonly identified as extremely or somewhat stressful were financial issues, lack of communication, problems with intimacy . . .

ital stress from the following: “at-risk” children, conflicts regarding chinuch of children, lack of communication, lack of relationship and intimacy, religious differences, finances and lack of social network. But a word of caution is in order: In large samples, even small differences can be statistically significant. Thus, while these findings likely did not occur by chance, the absolute differences between ba’alei teshuvah and others regarding these stressors were not huge. However, the implications are nonetheless important. As rabbis, mental health professionals, community leaders or even as caring relatives and neighbors, we need to show special sensitivity to those issues that may especially impact ba’alei teshuvah.

If we’re going to take the findings of this survey to the next step, one of the important questions to ask is, “Where do Orthodox people get their ideas as to what they should expect in a marriage?” Respondents were asked this very question and were invited to select as many responses as they wished. Interestingly, those married less than five years are far more likely to be looking to religious figures to guide their expectations. At the same time, though, it’s remarkable how very few of those married thirty years or more mention rabbis as a source for their current expectations—only about one in ten.

Those married for less than five years are also more likely to mention “family,” “community” and “friends” as sources, a valuable piece of information in terms of possible points of intervention. And finally, although the absolute numbers are not huge, it’s noteworthy that those married less than five years are far more likely to consider Hollywood, magazines and other sources from popular culture to guide their expectations in marriage, perhaps not the wisest choices.
We live in an age where, unfortunately, many people who are dating have the bizarre view that life is without stress—that somehow they’re going to get a “Problem-Free Mate.” The reality is that every marriage will have stress and conflict; and, as this survey attests, the conflicts in Orthodox Jewish marriages are pretty similar to those found in marriages in the general public. What is most important is educating the public about how to negotiate the inevitable stresses because these stresses have to happen. Dr. John Mordechai Gottman, one of the leading evidence-based experts on marriage, finds that if couples don’t fight at all, it’s actually a risk factor for a marriage. Couples have to fight—that’s the way the inevitable differences are resolved. But couples need to learn how to fight.

It’s important to realize that everyone’s level of marital satisfaction dips—especially as couples experience the stresses of raising children and financial pressures. However, as one experiences that dip in marital satisfaction, it is essential to understand that it is normal, that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

The training implications derived from the survey are also important. Effective premarital training programs (or chatan and kallah classes) can really make a difference. Catholic countries that require a premarital counseling program before a priest will marry individuals tend to have lower divorce rates than similar Catholic countries that don’t have such a requirement. The need for such training is clearly emerging from the survey’s data.

One area in particular that is important to address is stress related to intimacy issues. Close to half of the respondents cited some problems with intimacy issues and lack of sexual education. There isn’t necessarily a language on sexuality that we’re teaching to couples. Moreover, there’s something missing in the way we convey values about sexuality to our children.

As mentioned earlier, the survey also reveals some fascinating findings on at-risk kids and on ba’alei teshuvah. We find evidence of “affluenza” in our data, that is, an increased risk among youth in the more affluent segments of the Orthodox world—a phenomenon that is equally true in the general population and about which much has been written. Dr. Suniya S. Luthar, professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, finds that when you compare wealthy adolescents to adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, there’s about triple the rate of depression, a higher rate of substance and alcohol abuse, and a higher rate of...
anxiety problems among the wealthy adolescents—which is totally contrary to what one would expect.

Dr. Luthar identifies the causes of the pathologies behind “affluenza,” all of which have implications for the Orthodox community as well. The first is that in more affluent neighborhoods, it’s never enough just to be average. I, for example, rarely hear a father come to shul on a Shabbat morning and say, “You know, my kid got in the fiftieth percentile on the SATs.” One just doesn’t hear that. Secondly, Dr. Luthar notes the tremendous time pressure in families. Oftentimes parents, even though they are physically present, they are not there. They’re there, and they’re not there. In the age of the cell phone and the BlackBerry, this is a very real issue. We know that there’s a direct linear correlation between parents really being present with their children, really being there as opposed to being distracted, and the likelihood that their children will grow up to actualize their dreams and aspirations, and not succumb to negative influences. Finally, Dr. Luthar claims that affluent children very often are not asked to go beyond themselves to give to others. There is, generally speaking, no required helpfulness in their homes. True, some students engage in communal service to be able to add volunteer work to their college applications. However, research shows that when a student has to do the service for school, it does very little good. When giving to others and getting past oneself is something required of adolescents, when it’s part of the culture, youth tend to come alive, and the probability of their becoming at-risk is significantly diminished.

All of these observations obviously require much more explanation and analysis. This article is hopefully the first of many on the important points brought out by the survey.

While there are no hard data, there is certainly a perception that there seems to be more and more divorces taking place in our community. On a positive note, however, what this survey shows is that even with the rising divorce rate within the Orthodox community, the overall message is positive: Our satisfaction rates are quite high. When filling out this survey, most people are saying, “Well, you know something? If I had to do it over again, I’d marry the same person.” If seven out of ten people are saying that, that’s pretty good. Of course, our work is not done; we should always strive to improve. Gathering and analyzing data is an important first step, but we must follow up by training rabbis, educators and the community.

---

Reserve the date and plan now to be at the

Orthodox Union National Convention

Sunday, January 16, 2011
Woodcliff Lake Hilton, NJ

Full day program of shiurim, workshops, seminars and plenary discussions, elections and resolutions.

Watch www.ou.org for updated information