

Emotional distance linchpin for failed marriage: Academic

► 'Communication becomes superficial and avoidance replaces engagement'

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PETALING JAYA: Universiti Putra Malaysia Human Development & Family Studies Department head Dr Muslihah Hasbullah said many marriages end not because of constant arguments but due to a quiet drift into emotional distance.

She said couples often stop "turning towards each other" long before separation becomes inevitable.

She added that communication becomes superficial, resentment builds and avoidance gradually replaces meaningful engagement.

"In everyday behaviour, couples may avoid difficult conversations, become defensive or emotionally shut down to keep the peace.

"Over time, this avoidance erodes trust and creates emotional distance that becomes very difficult to repair."

She said many couples also delay seeking professional help because counselling is still largely perceived as a last resort rather than preventive support.

"Intervention often comes too late, when one or both partners have already decided the marriage is beyond saving.

"There is still stigma attached to seeking

counselling, and many are not aware that divorce is not the only option," she said, adding that in non-violent cases, relationships could often be repaired if support is sought early.

Muslihah said divorce should not automatically be seen as a failure.

"The law allows for divorce, including divorce by mutual consent. What matters most is that responsibility towards children does not end with the marriage."

She added that parents must continue to work together through healthy co-parenting arrangements even after separation, while society should move away from a blame-based view and recognise amicable divorce as a lawful process centred on dignity, fairness and the wellbeing of children.

She also said chronic stress, including financial strain, mental health challenges and post-pandemic burnout, has also weakened marital stability in recent years.

"When stress becomes prolonged, couples have less emotional energy for patience, empathy and problem-solving.

"The relationship enters a 'survival mode,' in which partners react instead of working as a team."

She said common stress responses such as withdrawal, irritability or emotional exhaustion are often misinterpreted as a lack of love.

"Uneven responsibilities could lead to burnout, gradually eroding the partnership marriage is meant to provide."

Muslihah also warned about the psychological impact of adversarial divorce processes, particularly on children.

"For adults, a win-lose mindset increases

hostility, and makes emotional closure and cooperative co-parenting more difficult.

"For children, prolonged parental conflict is one of the strongest predictors of long-term emotional distress."

She advocated therapeutic and child-centred approaches to separation, such as mediation, counselling-supported divorce and structured parenting programmes.

These help families separate their roles as spouses while preserving their roles as parents, safeguarding children's emotional security.

She said preventing marital breakdown requires timely and structured support, not just crisis intervention.

"This includes relationship education, parenting programmes during major life transitions and accessible counselling before conflict becomes entrenched.

"Equally important are legal and psychological literacy, so couples understand their rights, responsibilities and the long-term impact of conflict on children."

Ultimately, divorce rarely happens overnight.

"It is usually the result of accumulated stress, silence and missed opportunities for support. Seeking help early should be seen as an act of care rather than weakness.

"Even when separation becomes unavoidable, how families navigate the process matters deeply.

"With the right support, it is possible to reduce harm, preserve dignity and protect children's well-being. Relationships may change form, but the responsibility to act with care and compassion remains."