

BSU helps couples with marital woes

By Edie Jeffers

Imagine a young married couple — let's call them Joe and Patty. They have three kids, ages 2, 4 and 7. Theirs is a stressful life compounded by their jobs and a full load of classes at Boise State.

Although this may sound like a recipe for disaster, similar situations are a reality for many of BSU's "non-traditional" students, people who may be balancing marriage, family and work along with their education. And like a growing number of non-traditional students, Joe and Patty may need to turn to the BSU Counseling Center to help them maintain this balancing act.

"Most marriages [of this kind] are under great strain going to school, trying to make a living and raising kids," says Jim Nicholson, director of the Counseling Center. "I certainly see some healthy marriages that are under stress; we can help them put it back together again."

Although the Counseling Center is not set up for long-term therapy, the counselors there may see a student over an extended period of time. The center, which is accredited by the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS), provides comprehensive services for students with six or more credits. The staff includes five licensed counselors, three psychologists, including Nicholson, and several master's-level interns. The average number of sessions per student is four and the style of counseling is solution-focused intervention, which means the therapy looks to find the person's strengths and mobilize personal and external resources.

Students may visit the counseling center for short-term therapy when contemplating entering into a relationship, deciding when to have children, or for a whole range of other relationship issues. But many of the clients seeking extended help from the center are working through the process of divorce. "The center helps students through the whole process of the breakup — dealing with divorce, custody issues, and possibly remarriage and examining what went wrong the first time," explains Nicholson.

The students who visit the counseling

of salt."

"And choose your battles," Dreps adds. "Decide what's really important. There are some things that just aren't worth fighting over."

"I think [in our generation] there was a greater sense of 'til death us do part,'" says Doli, 81. "Not this, 'Well I can always get a divorce if it doesn't work.' I think there probably was a deeper sense of going into something together through thick or thin instead of 'I've got to be happy.'"

"Another thing," Doli adds, "and this is a difference between generations, we didn't have a whole lot of material expectations. We still don't. We live very simply and we always have. We've never had more than one car."

Both college-educated, Don spent 30 years teaching biology at Boise State, starting when it was still Boise Junior College. Doli stayed home with their two children. They filled their free time with horseback rides, camping, hiking, skiing and traveling around the world. They've been members of a book club for 25 years.

But Doli acknowledges that times have changed and even her own daughter could not live the life that she had.

"Being the non-money-making part of a team didn't bother me," she says. "It is not fulfilling for our daughter. She is somebody in her own right. She and her husband both teach at Kansas State and theirs is a very good marriage, but on my terms I don't think she could cope. She'd be bored."

• Successful and traditional marriages like the Obees may be hard to find 50 years from now. Many of today's couples wait

longer to marry while others struggle to redefine marriage and their respective roles in making it work. And there are plenty of resources on the market to help couples keep their marriages going.

Counselors and marriage experts are filling bookstores these days with self-help books such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus; Getting the Love You Want; and Keeping the Love You Find*, which offer couples ways to improve their communication and get what they want out of their relationships.

But despite the odds, marriage is still popular. In Idaho, the number of marriages rose for the sixth consecutive year, increasing 3 percent from 1992

to 1993. Because the pace of the population growth was higher, however, the marriage rate actually fell from 13.6 to 13.5 per 1,000. The national rate for the number of marriages in 1993 was 9 percent per 1,000, down from 9.3 in 1992. Much of the difference between Idaho and U.S. rates can be attributed to the high number of non-residents who marry in northern Idaho, statistics show.

Self-help books, blueprints and marriage counselors aside, marriage takes work, experts emphasize, and no one plan works for every couple. As author John Gray says in his book, "We have forgotten that men and women are supposed to be different. As a result our relationships are filled with unnecessary friction and conflict. ... When you remember that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, everything can be explained."

Or, take Benjamin Franklin's simple advice: "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, and half shut afterwards." □



Don and Doli Obee say that having fun together is important to a successful marriage.

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center for help with marriage problems primarily fall into two groups: those who have a healthy relationship and need a tune-up of sorts, and those who have an unhealthy relationship and may need to break up or make significant changes to reconcile and/or maintain individual mental health.

Among couples with a generally healthy relationship, Nicholson says one common problem is the lack of time spent together. Because of their hectic schedule, Joe and Patty exemplify couples who fall into this category. "I see healthy couples lose track of each other," he says. "It's real easy to get out of the cycle of having fun together. You get two people who are worn out and stressed out, yet they expect the marriage to work. That's not a very good formula.

"With some of the healthier relationships, it's sometimes a matter of helping people reconnect and re-establish time together. They know how to be healthy, but are torn apart by day-to-day demands. It's like you've been in an exercise program, gotten out of it, and something gives you a jolt and you say, 'Oh yeah, I need to do this.'"

Joe and Patty may simply need to set aside some regular time together without the kids. This arrangement gives couples the opportunity to talk about things other than all the causes of stress in their lives.

In addition to individual and couples counseling, BSU's Counseling Center offers a variety of courses and workshops

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for students who may be in need of help getting a marriage back in shape, or in recovering from an unhealthy relationship. Offerings include a workshop called "Fighting for Your Relationship," a one-credit class on surviving divorce called "Moving On," and family issues and parenting classes. Other topics include self-esteem, fears and phobias, depression, co-dependency and stress management. In addition, the center offers programs for single parents and services for children.

BSU students can get help through several other organizations on campus. The BSU Center for New Directions, for example, provides support for single parents and displaced homemakers and single pregnant women who are making the transition to self-sufficiency and employability.

The center, which is operated through the College of Technology, offers divorce support groups and individual divorce counseling for men and women with licensed counselors or master's-level counseling students. The support groups

are generally made up of 10 men and women and are offered on a periodic basis. The center offices are in Boise and in Nampa at the BSU Canyon County Center and are part of a statewide network of centers affiliated with state colleges and universities.

"Divorce is a tough issue for families. It's tough on kids and tough on both partners," says Ranelle Nabring, acting coordinator for the Center for New Directions. "We are often in a position of helping people understand how divorce will impact their children, their career and decisions about their financial future. We help people answer the question: After everything is divvied up, how are you going to provide for your kids?"

BSU students who are veterans can use the counseling services of the Veterans Administration to deal with marriage and divorce issues. And BSU faculty and staff and their spouses who may be dealing with marriage issues can use the Employee Assistance Program for individual or couples counseling for up to 12 sessions annually.

Throughout their entire college careers, Joe and Patty can look to resources at Boise State for help as they try to maintain a balance between work, family and school. Perhaps they will receive an education that will not only help prepare them for their chosen career, but also help them have a successful marriage and family life. □