A Relational Approach to Religion and Spirituality in Marriage:
The Role of Couples’ Religious Communication in Marital Satisfaction

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**IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION:**
Married couples who experience less marital satisfaction or seek to deepen their connection may benefit from developing effective religious communication skills and forgiveness of oneself and one’s partner. Regardless of specific religious orientations, extension educators can address ways to link faith and marital satisfaction through educational programs.

*Couples’ religious communication.* Regular communication about religion is an important mechanism for faith translating into marital satisfaction. Couples’ religious communication involves partners sharing through
- praying together
- talking about central aspects of faith such as
  - God’s place in the couple’s marriage,
  - how to live out God’s will in their lives, or
  - personal, moral, or spiritual matters.

*Forgiveness of self and spouse.* Forgiveness is a central theme in many religious teachings and involves actively fostering positive attitudes toward one’s transgressor. Unforgiveness often involves a desire for revenge or retaliation on the transgressor. Forgiveness involves
- letting go of retaliation (e.g., getting even, making one’s spouse regret what they did),
- taking steps toward reconciliation, and
- nurturing goodwill toward the transgressor.

**Overview**
The authors examined aspects of spirituality and religion in marriage given the widespread belief by Americans in God or some type of higher power. The authors investigate the links between marital satisfaction and both a partner’s individual relationship with God, which has been studied before, and a couple’s shared religious communication, which has not been previously studied.

Several hypotheses were proposed regarding the association of marital satisfaction and partners’ individual relationships with God, marital satisfaction and a couple’s shared religious communication, and between forgiveness and marital satisfaction. The authors also studied the direct and indirect effects of spirituality and religion on marital satisfaction by examining if forgiveness mediated the associations between marital satisfaction and couples’ shared religious communication and between marital satisfaction and partners’ individual relationships with God. Finally, a couple’s shared religious communication was examined as a possible mediator of the association between marital satisfaction and partners’ individual relationships with God.

**Method**
*Participants:* Three hundred and forty-two heterosexual married couples participated in this study recruited primarily through a midwestern university. The average age was 48 for males and 46 years for females. About 80% of participants were White, and 66% were college graduates. About 57% of the sample earned a household income of more than $100,000 annually. The mean number of years married was about 20 years, and the mean number of children in the homes was about 2.

The majority (77.6%) of all participants identified with Christianity (29.2% Protestants, 38.4% Catholics, and 10% other Christians). The remaining identified as Muslims (0.4%), Hindus
Buddhists (1%), Jews (5.8%), Atheists/Agnostics (7.4%), and Other (7.1%). Couples were coded as Christian couples (both partners identified as Christians = 69.8%) or non-Christian couples (one or both partners identified as non-Christian = 30.2%). Finally, 72.8% of couples reported sharing the same faith while 27.2% reported having different faiths.

**Measures:** Data was self-reported using four scales: the Quality of Marriage Index, Individual Relationship with God (a subscale of another multidimensional measure), Joint Religious Communication (a subscale of Joint Religious Activity), and Forgiveness. Three were scored on 7-point scales and one (Individual Relationship with God) was scored on a 4-point scale.

**Results and Discussion**

The authors reported six major findings.

1. Partners’ individual relationships with God indirectly relate to marital quality through manifestation in a couple’s shared religious communication.
2. Couples’ shared religious communication is directly and positively related to marital quality.
3. Each individuals’ forgiveness of the other partner is positively associated with marital satisfaction.
4. A tendency towards unforgiveness by either partner is negatively linked to marital quality.
5. Generally, same-faith couples report higher marital satisfaction than mixed-faith couples.
6. Shared religious communication is more strongly associated with marital quality among mixed-faith couples than among same-faith couples.

Further research is needed in several areas. Due to a large portion of the sample being White, well-educated, higher income families, further research with a more diverse sample of couples would be beneficial in better understanding the breadth of the results. In this study, forgiveness is studied as a mediator for religion and marital satisfaction so the study of other mediators such as love, general communication patterns, and compromise could expand the knowledge base of this topic as well.