

**There are instances when going separate ways is a positive move.**

# Not always a bad thing

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**T**HE number of divorces in Malaysia has been increasing, especially among Muslims. In 2004, the total number of divorces was 19,800 compared to 15,149 in 2000, an increase of 31%.

The rate of divorce (taken as total divorces over total marriages in the same year) was 9.9% in 2000 compared to 12.2% in 2004 (refer to table).

The divorce rate in Malaysia may not be as high as certain developed countries but definitely more couples are saying, "I don't want to stay in their marriage."

According to Dr Ng Lai Oon, clinical psychologist and lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the most common reasons for divorce are violence, verbal or mental abuse and infidelity.

"Sexual incompetence and financial problems are also other reasons," he said.

Lawyer Theresa Ho\* (not her real name) said in her experience dealing with divorce cases, the main reason boils down to incompatibility.

"Many couples divorce when they can't work out their differences. Gone are the days when a woman divorces her husband because of a third party (on his side)," said Ho, whose firm deals with at least one divorce case a month.

Today, women are more independent financially and do not suffer in silence anymore, added Ho, who has been practising for seven years.

"They are saying, 'Sorry, I'm not happy, let's separate,'" she said, adding that many couples face problems usually in their 30s and 40s.

Added Dr Ng, "There's also better advocacy of women's rights and women are more empowered."

Counselling lecturer Assoc Prof Dr Saedah Abdul Ghani of Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (formerly known as Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia), said among the main factors is misunderstanding between husband and wife.

"These misunderstandings are due to stress. Most couples now have dual careers and the wives have to work, and take care of housework if the husbands do not help out," she said. "This leads to burn-out and less patience on the wife's part, causing misunderstanding and lack of control of emotions."

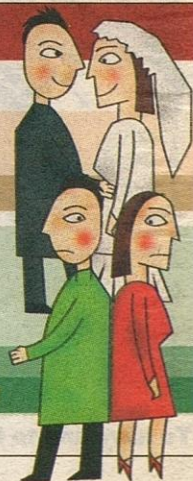
"If couples do not get any professional help or have the skill to cope with these problems, they will separate," said Saedah, a registered counsellor with a PhD in marriage

## Marriage and divorce rates in Malaysia

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Muslim marriages	91,990	91,121	95,281	101,842	111,944
Non-Muslim marriages	61,290	55,017	59,228	59,387	50,089
<b>Total marriages</b>	<b>153,280</b>	<b>146,138</b>	<b>154,509</b>	<b>161,229</b>	<b>162,033</b>
Muslim divorces	13,536	13,187	13,841	15,543	16,509
Divorce rate* (%)	14.7	14.5	14.5	15.3	14.7
Non-Muslim divorces	1,613	3,238	3,793	3,318	3,291
Divorce rate* (%)	2.6	5.9	6.4	5.6	6.6
<b>Total divorces</b>	<b>15,149</b>	<b>16,425</b>	<b>17,634</b>	<b>18,861</b>	<b>19,800</b>
<b>Overall divorce rate* (%)</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>11.7</b>	<b>12.2</b>

(\*taken as number of divorces over marriages in a year)

Source (of absolute figures): Women, Family and Community Development Ministry



**»Couples may lead better lives apart when differences can no longer be tolerated«**

**DR NG LAI OON**

However, there are many couples who decide to stick it out despite trouble in their marriage.

"Children and finance are two main causes why couples stay in a marriage. The others include traditional or religious values, high optimism, feeling helpless and maintaining status," shared Dr Ng, also coordinator of the Master of Clinical Psychology Programme at UKM.

## Ways to strengthen a marriage

There are many things couples should do to make a marriage work, he advised.

"Be involved in an active level of activities together such as going to movies, gardening, exercising, taking a stroll or cooking," said Dr Ng, who also encourages couples to maintain a healthy sex life.

Good listening skills, awareness of each other's feelings and thoughts, and positive coupling (looking out for each other's positive aspects daily) are also important.

"Learn to accept each other's differences. Be understanding, empathetic and practise getting out of an argument quickly.

"Be aware of where conflicts come from and try to prevent them from arising in the first place," he said.

He added that when conflicts arise, couples must learn to deal with them in a way that does not aggravate the situation.

"Conflicts highlight an individual's vulnerabilities, so handling them can actually

and family counselling.

Divorce due to third parties is also common, she said.

"When there is no outlet to share or pour out problems, a spouse will turn to someone with the same problems. When it's with the opposite sex, both end up attracted to each other," said Saedah, who gives counselling on a voluntary basis.

The lack of social support in an urban setting also contributes to the problem.

"In rural areas, there are family or relatives nearby to give social support. In urban

areas, neighbours are too individualistic and peers in the office too busy," she said.

According to Saedah, divorce rates are high among couples with young children and also among couples around the retirement age. Young couples, she explained, would be burdened with raising children.

"Men who are retired have more time, and money from their retirement fund, so some of them want to try new experiences. For the Muslims, they will tend to look for a second wife who is younger and more active sexually," said Saedah.

abilities, so handling them can actually improve a couple's growth and increase intimacy.

"Effort is the key," he stressed.

Saedah highlighted the importance of pre-marital counselling. In 2005, the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) introduced a nationwide pre-marriage course called SMARTSTART. As of September last year, more than 200 programmes have been carried out.

"Pre-marital counselling is important for couples to learn about communication, maintaining a good sexual