

Are relationships in US as casual as they seem?

By Swati Desai

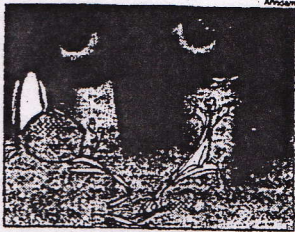
My friend Shalini described the tale of her cousin sister's failing marriage at the hands of her mother-in-law's manipulations and devious ways and the total lack of understanding from her husband. Shalini commented on how in my psychotherapy practice in the US, I did not have to deal with this anguish because decision to divorce is not such a huge ordeal.

As I was answering her question, several things went through my mind. It is true that the specific trigger of extended family interference, especially husband's loyalty to his mother, is not a major issue in breaking a relationship in the US. It is also true that the divorce rate is as high as 50%. The social pressure of staying in the marriage, although not absent, is much less. The personal growth, or potential for personal happiness holds much higher value in the Western culture, over and above the family stability and isolation from the comforts of social acceptance. It is common to talk about "half brother" or "step mother" just the way we in India would talk about cousin sister or maternal uncle. All this makes the family animal in our Indian psyche restless, at times disgusted with the perceived ease of breaking a relationship. Besides, the American popular culture creates a myth in our mind

about sex-crazed Americans who just want to have fun.

Are relationships taken so lightly in the US as we seem to believe? Are we trying to understand the American relationships just like a blind man trying to figure out the shape of an elephant? May be so. Over the years, I have made one observation. Barring the severe trauma from extreme events such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, life-altering accidents and so on,

wife he loved. A friend who went through clinical depression over the issue of breaking his five-year old relationship, and several other friends who kept going back to the painful relationships just because the pain of breaking up was even more unbearable. Innumerable books, support groups, and research projects focus on relationships, how to make them work, effects of broken marriages, and how to enhance happiness from relationships.



Connectedness and attachments are innate human conditions that are manifested in all cultures, no matter how individualised it may seem from outside. Why bother trying to understand this about the US culture? Two big reasons: in urban India we have begun to see the same difficulties involved in joining two inde-

pendent uncompromising minds in matrimony. We may have a tendency to assume marriages can be casually broken off, but it has never been easy. Secondly, plenty of lessons can be learnt from the research conducted on what works in relationships and watching the balancing act of promoting individual freedom and valuing intact family.

The examples from normal middle class Americans are plenty. The couple who came to therapy in their mid 50s with 20-year old mistrust problems finally made several mutual compromises because of wanting to keep the family intact for their teenage daughter. The man who was guilt-ridden by his extramarital affair because of the thought of breaking his marriage and hurting the

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