

Workshop A - Creating Unity with Friendship, Laughter, and Social Vitality

Sweden Bahá'í Summer School, Thursday, July 9, 2026, 14:00-17:00

Instructions: Form groups of 3-4 people and begin studying Section 1. The approximate time for each section is provided, and there is a break between sections 2 and 3.

Section 1: Building Unity and Creating Connection (30 minutes)

There are many potential benefits to connecting with others and building unity. Consider whether these might be factors for you:

1. Increase the strength of a friendship or form new ones
2. Help you cope more easily with workload and difficulties
3. Make it easier to encourage and assist each other with personal growth and change
4. Increase energy and productivity
5. Deepen emotional intimacy, and for married couples, increase physical intimacy
6. Increase harmony and satisfaction
7. Add balance to busy lives
8. Help with relaxing and not taking oneself too seriously
9. Increase feelings of gratitude
10. Expand mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being

Do you agree? Do you have anything to add?

Quotations

Read all the quotations and then discuss the questions below them.

1. "God has created such union and harmony between man and wife that no one can conceive in this world a greater plane of union. You must irrigate continually the tree of your union with the water of love and affection, so that it may remain green and verdant throughout all the seasons...." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, Vol. 6, p. 21; <http://centerofcovenanttalks.blogspot.com/2013/06/advice-given-by-abdul-baha-to-believer.html>)
2. "When you love a member of your family..., let it be with a ray of the Infinite Love! Let it be in God, and for God! Wherever you find the attributes of God love that person...." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #9)
3. "Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquility, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. Such a family but addeth to its stature and its lasting honor, as day succeedeth day." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #221)

Discussion Questions

1. What might be some visible signs that unity is present among people?

©2026 Marriage Transformation®; www.marriagetransformation.com; Susanne M. Alexander; susanne@marriagetransformation.com; +1.423.599.0153

2. Based on your experience, what are some ways to build unity in a marriage, family, or community?
3. What actions can you take to restore unity when your relationship is out of harmony?
4. How can you use the arts to foster, sustain, and express unity between you?

Activity:

Turn Toward: Notice when someone is trying to get your attention and has something they want to share with you. If you turn toward the person (rather than away), unity will increase.

Examples:

- “Come see this beautiful sunset!”
- “I’m cooking something new tonight. Will you taste it and tell me what you think?”
- “I’m struggling to complete this community activity report. Would you please give me your suggestions?”

Discuss some ideas of turning toward someone.

Section 2: Maintaining Friendships and Friendship in Marriage (30 minutes)

Beginning and sustaining a friendship requires commitment, time, attention, care, and the willingness to open oneself to another person. The Bahá’í teachings also use terms such as ‘companions’ and ‘comrades’ when friendship is part of marriage. Friendships grow through shared experiences, such as talking, having fun, learning new skills, participating in activities, accompanying each other through new or difficult experiences, and collaborating on community service and spiritual or religious activities.

Friendships require communication:

- In-person time together
- Text and email messages
- Video calls
- Meaningful conversations

Being a steadfast and loyal friend requires patience and the ability to communicate, understand, forgive, and resolve unpleasantness or disagreements. The Universal House of Justice, the international administrative body of the Bahá’í Faith, used the term “veritable friendships” in one of its messages – building true friendships with people (*Framework for Action*, #14.4). To achieve a close or true friendship, both people must be willing to grow, mature, and learn from their interactions.

Quotations

Read all the quotations and then discuss the questions below them.

1. “The Lord...hath made woman and man to abide with each other in the closest companionship, and to be even as a single soul. They are two helpmates, two intimate friends, who should be concerned about the welfare of each other. If they live thus, they will pass through this world with perfect contentment, bliss, and peace of heart, and become the object of divine grace and

favor in the Kingdom of heaven.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #92)

2. “Before choosing a wife a man must think soberly and seriously that this [woman] will be his friend throughout all his life. It is not a temporary matter. She is a soul with whom he must associate all the days of his life; she will be his mate and his intimate confidant; therefore, day by day their love and their attachment to each other must increase.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, Vol. 6, p. 21) <http://centerofcovenanttalks.blogspot.com/2013/06/advice-given-by-abdul-baha-to-believer.html>)
3. “... [H]appy marriages are based on a deep friendship. By this I mean a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other’s company. These couples tend to know each other intimately—they are well versed in each other’s likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes, and dreams. They have an abiding regard for each other and express this fondness not just in the big ways but through small gestures day in and day out. ... Friendship fuels the flames of romance because it offers the best protection against feeling adversarial toward your spouse. ... In the strongest marriages, husband and wife share a deep sense of meaning. They don’t just ‘get along’—they also support each other’s hopes and aspirations and build a sense of purpose into their lives together.” (Researcher: John M. Gottman, Ph.D., and Nan Silver, *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 2nd ed., pp. 21-22; 28)

Discussion Questions

1. What are some qualities of a good friend?
2. Why is friendship important in marriage?
3. What do you value about the close friendships you have?

Activity:

Take turns sharing a brief story about how a friend contributed positively to your life. If you are married, you could instead share a story about how you and your partner are friends with each other.

*****15-30 Minute Break (check that you have time to finish the rest of the workshop handout)**

Section 3: Being Happy and Enjoying Laughter (30-45 minutes)

The ability to laugh together and appreciate the humor in your lives can strengthen your marriage and family life. Laughter can spread, lifting each other's spirits and reaching other family members and friends. Your happy marriage and family are a way of serving others.

The Benefits of Laughter: Science has shown that laughter can lower stress, improve well-being, reduce blood pressure, boost immunity, reduce pain, and more. From an emotional standpoint, laughter lightens the heart, brings people together, and fosters positive feelings about circumstances. When people look for what is funny in a difficult situation, it distracts them from

negative thoughts and makes it easier to find solutions. Laughter can be a spiritual practice, especially when it fosters unity and friendship among people.

Storytelling: Sharing stories from your life is an important way to build connection and share laughter. Telling stories effectively means intentionally observing the details of life, behaviors, and quirky interactions; remembering them; and then sharing them with others in a compelling or humorous way. As you share a story, you are reminded of the positive memory, and you try to tell it in a way that brings enjoyment to others. A bond then develops between you and your listeners. (Remember not to backbite about someone while storytelling, though!)

Quotations

Read all the quotations and then discuss the questions below them.

1. "... [L]augh, smile and rejoice in order that others may be made happy by you." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 218)
2. "One of the signs of a decadent society, a sign which is very evident in the world today, is an almost frenetic devotion to pleasure and diversion, an insatiable thirst for amusement, a fanatical devotion to games and sport, a reluctance to treat any matter seriously, and a scornful, derisory attitude towards virtue and solid worth. Abandonment of 'a frivolous conduct' does not imply that a Bahá'í must be sour-faced or perpetually solemn. Humor, happiness, joy are characteristics of a true Bahá'í life. Frivolity palls and eventually leads to boredom and emptiness, but true happiness and joy and humor that are parts of a balanced life that includes serious thought, compassion and humble servitude to God, are characteristics that enrich life and add to its radiance." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I, #138)
3. "... [W]hile laughter should not be suppressed or frowned upon, it should not be indulged in at the expense of the feelings of others. What one says or does in a humorous vein should not give rise to prejudice of any kind. You may recall 'Abdu'l-Bahá's caution 'Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person...' (*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Vol. 1, p. 45)." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, quoted in a Bahá'í World Centre Research Department Memorandum, January 12, 1997, "*The Humorist*")
4. "Mrs. Parsons arranged a luncheon party at her home and asked some twenty people, all outstanding in various walks of life, to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Culture, science, art, wealth, politics, achievement--all were represented. The hostess was eager that 'Abdu'l-Bahá should tell those leaders of society about Bahá'u'lláh and the Faith He had proclaimed to mankind. Probably the guests thought that they were in for a lecture. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá told them a story which made them laugh. He Himself laughed heartily, and again with them when they, encouraged by the lead He had given, also told amusing stories. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his guests were full of mirth throughout that luncheon. It was 'good to laugh', He told them; 'laughter is a spiritual relaxation'. At this point He referred to His years in prison. Life was hard, He said, tribulations were never far away, and yet, at the end of the day, they would sit together and recall events that had been fantastic, and laugh over them. Funny situations could not be abundant, but still they probed and sought them, and laughed. Joy was not, He told them, a by-product of material comfort and affluence. Were it so, dejection would have ruled every hour of their lives in those days, whereas their souls were joyful. Those Americans, distinguished in public life, had

received the impact of truth, often absent from their daily experience, and they looked with new eyes at the visitor from the East, eyes that mirrored deep admiration and respect. And the great heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá enveloped them all." (H. M. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá-The Centre of the Covenant*, pp. 31-32)

5. "Laughter is a spiritual practice. ... The transformative nature of any spiritual discipline comes with regular practice. When done consistently, it can eventually change our lives. If we make time to invite joy into our lives each day, we will become more aware of joy and laughter in our lives and in the world. Eventually, laughter will become an innate part of who we are." (Rev. Susan Sparks, *Laugh Your Way to Grace—Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor*, pp. 9-10)

Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel when you smile or laugh?
2. What happens in your everyday life that helps you smile or laugh?
3. When has laughter or humor helped you feel more connected to someone?
4. How do laughter and humor help you when you are of service to others?

Activity:

Build Sharing Humor Skills: Each person in the group chooses one of the activities below and shares it with the group. After each person's turn, listeners share what they found funny (or not), how they responded to the humor, and what they learned.

- a. Tell a funny story about the relationships or marriages of your parents, grandparents, other relatives, or friends.
- b. Tell a funny story about a couple's relationship or family life.
- c. Tell a funny story from a recent (or childhood) experience.
- d. Tell a joke.

(Note: Ensure that your partner and family will not have a problem with you sharing the story publicly.)

Section 4: Enjoying Social Vitality and Hospitality (30 minutes)

Marriage is a social relationship. You talk, laugh, touch, cook, clean, and parent in a dynamic interaction with one another. Each couple's flow is unique. Some couples are naturally more serious and are happy with this as the "culture" of their marriage. However, many couples appreciate bringing a lighter side to their relationship.

You might be shy, isolated, or unsure how to meet someone new or start what could become a good friendship. For many people, it takes courage and perseverance to make the effort to spend time with people you want to get to know and offer them hospitality. It helps to understand how important it is to feel connected to other people.

Relationships of many types can begin with a spark of shared connection. Perhaps you initiate a conversation with someone about a topic of mutual interest, or you are engaged in an activity together. This could be grocery shopping, a sports activity, a school club, a neighborhood clean-up, waiting in a line or queue, or any place where people gather. As you smile and make a connection,

and as the conversation continues, you may exchange contact information and stay in touch. Your conversations can become increasingly meaningful, and friendship may then grow.

Perhaps your focus on unity and social vitality is your immediate and extended family. Family is a building block of humanity's unity, so strengthening your skills at this level is very important. You may be involved in a core activity of the Bahá'í community, such as a devotional gathering, study circle, junior youth spiritual empowerment program, or a children's class, and want to get to know someone else who participates. Inviting them to your home is a loving and friendly gesture.

Quotations

Read all the quotations and then discuss the questions below them.

1. "Now is the time to cheer and refresh the down-cast through the invigorating breeze of love and fellowship, and the living waters of friendliness and charity." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, #V)
2. "My home is the home of peace. My home is the home of joy and delight. My home is the home of laughter and exultation. Whosoever enters through the portals of this home, must go out with gladsome heart. This is the home of light; whosoever enters here must become illumined...." (A reported statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, published in *Star of the West*, Vol. 9, number 3, April 28, 1918, p. 40)
3. "... [T]he maturity of a Spiritual Assembly* cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not." (Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #14.22)
*Local elected council
4. "Familjemedlemmarnas nära relation och deras uppriktiga önskan att tjäna andra skapar ett unikt socialt rum: Ett bahá'í-hem. Ett levande bahá'í-hem är en oersättlig del i den samhällsbyggande processen på gräsrotsnivå. I hemmets kärleksfulla miljö hjälper familjemedlemmarna varandra att bli kapabla och förvissade förkämpar för den gudomliga planen och de välkomnar och hjälper andra att vara delaktiga i omvandlingen av samhället. I ett bahá'í-hem förenas gästfrihet med andlig vederkvickelse och intellektuell utveckling. Genom aktiviteter som varje bahá'í-familj kan erbjuda i sitt hem kan den åskådliggöra ett sätt att leva som kan efterliknas av alla dem som önskar motverka de splittrande krafter som när missnöje, konflikter och egenintresse och väva de band av tillit, samarbete och konstruktiv handling som ett sunt samhälle är beroende av. I en rad kluster världen över öppnar redan grupper av familjer sina hem och arbetar tillsammans för att hjälpa till att befästa lokala aktiviteter och storligen öka deras räckvidd och inflytande."

"The family members' intimate association and their earnest desire to serve others opens a unique social space: a Bahá'í home. A vibrant Bahá'í home is an irreplaceable element in the process of community building at the grassroots. In the loving environs of the home, family members support one another in becoming capable and confident protagonists of the Divine Plan, and they welcome and assist others to play a part in transforming society. In a Bahá'í home, warm hospitality combines with spiritual quickening and intellectual progress. Through

activities that every Bahá'í family can offer in its home, it can demonstrate a way of life that can be emulated by all those who seek to counteract the divisive forces that feed discontent, conflict, and self-interest, and to weave the bonds of trust, cooperation, and constructive action upon which a healthy community depends. Indeed, in a range of clusters worldwide, groups of families are already opening their homes and working together to help to consolidate local activities and to greatly extend their reach and influence." (Universal House of Justice, "Family Life and Marriage", para. #16)

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you greet people after being apart to help you feel connected?
2. How often do you participate in social activities? Which activities do you enjoy? What would you like to change?
3. How do you prepare yourself and your home for guests?
4. What do you like about offering hospitality? What is stressful for you instead? How can you manage that stress?
5. How does hospitality help you form friendships?
6. What do you do to make your guests happy?

Activity:

Discuss ways you can each offer hospitality during the next month.

End of Workshop Discussion with All Groups (15 minutes)

1. What did you enjoy about this workshop?
2. How could you share what you have learned in this document to enrich other people's lives?
3. What new actions will you now take?

Note:

Parts of this workshop document came from the following resources:

- Couple Discussion Guide: <https://marriagetransformation.com/shop/fun-laughter-and-social-leisure-time/>
- Self-Directed Learning Online Course: <https://www.transformationlearningcenter.com/courses/create-unity-with-friendship-and-laughter-self-directed> (Content created by Susanne M. Alexander and Wendi Momen)