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NFP and the Marital Relationship: The Catholic University of America Study

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FERTILITY-AWARENESS METHODS of natural family planning involve systems of observing, recording, and interpreting what is happening in a woman's body during her menstrual cycle by means of Basal Body Temperature, the Ovulation (Billings) Method, or the Sympto-Thermal Method to achieve, avoid, or delay pregnancy without drugs or devices.

An important NFP attitude was pointed out in the Billings (1973) study of premenopausal and menopausal women: The couples were instructed that they were free to depart from the method at any time and that a pregnancy would not be considered a "failure" in the minds of their instructors. While in practice most couples probably use a fertility-awareness method to avoid or delay pregnancy, the philosophical underpinnings of NFP suggest that, while a couple are taught about their fertility and how to recognize it, the responsible decision as to how the information will be used rests with the couple alone (Daly 1973).

Proponents claim the natural methods of family planning meet the criteria of Meeker and Gray (1975) for the ideal contraceptive—one that is effective, completely safe, without side effects, simple enough to require minimal intelligence or education, inexpensive, removed from the act of intercourse, completely reversible, and without a distribution problem. Additionally, fertility-awareness methods make a distinct claim—that of contributing positively to the overall marital relationship (Kippley and Kippley 1975, Ball and Ball 1975).

The above claim—that fertility-awareness methods would contribute positively to the marital relationship when their very nature requires periodic abstinence from sexual intercourse—seems to be self-contradictory. How *do* fertility-awareness methods affect the marital relationship?

To answer this question an exploratory, descriptive survey of couples who have used single or combined methods of fertility awareness six months or

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longer was undertaken as a master's dissertation in the School of Nursing at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

Method

Through five teaching centers in the United States (Western, Southwestern, Midwestern, and Eastern) a total of 458 questionnaires were mailed to all couples who had been taught a method of fertility awareness six months or more previously. From an overall return rate of 34.95 percent, the responses of 98 married couples who had actually used a natural method of family planning six months or longer were summarized.

An investigator-developed, 41-item questionnaire posed nine open-ended questions to permit maximum freedom for the respondents. In a post-priori method of categorization three independent expert raters identified the thought categories for each response. A 100 percent inter-rater agreement was required for category inclusion.

Profile of Respondents

A descriptive profile of the study population showed wide ranges in age (wives: 20 to 50 years, mean 31.95 years; husbands: 21 to 66 years, mean 34.29 years) and length of time married (from less than 1 year to 30 years, with a mean of 8.56 years). Annual income reported ranged from \$3,000 to \$56,000 per year, with a mean of \$18,237. While over half the husbands and wives reported some college education, one fourth of the husbands and 14 percent of the wives had received more than four years of college education. One wife and two husbands had not completed high school. While the mean number of children per family was 2.3, it is of interest that 21 couples (21.4 percent of the study population) had no children.

The known spontaneous-abortion figure of 34 reported per 275 live births gives a rate of 12.36 percent, which is within the "normal limits" described by Cavanaugh and Comas (1971) and Hellman and others (1971). This finding of a known spontaneous-abortion rate within normal limits in NFP couples is contrary to Bernard Haering's statement that the "rhythm" method causes "a disproportionate frequency of spontaneous abortion" (Haering 1976, p. 131). Haering's recommendation that there be a "most careful study of the rhythm of fertile days in order to beget children at the most favorable moment" (p. 123) actually supports fertility-awareness methods, wherein couples are most aware of the symptoms of ovulation and may use this knowledge to achieve as well as avoid pregnancy (Kippley and Kippley 1975).

Findings

The negative aspect of contraception accounted for the largest single reason given by respondents for choosing natural methods. This supports Daly's statement that natural methods are not just for Catholics but appeal to all who would "defend nature against rampant technology and question the pill on

When asked directly what they found to be the biggest difficulty in using fertility-awareness methods, respondents listed abstinence most often (37.91 percent of responses), though both husbands and wives volunteered positive aspects of abstinence in the following manner: "We learned to use other ways of showing love and affection," and, "I learned that my husband really loved me because he was willing to cooperate by accepting abstinence," and, "Planned abstinence seems to deepen the meaning of sexual relations." Other difficulties reported were method-related: charting, observing signs, and taking temperatures (19.43 percent); and learning, trusting, and interpreting the method (9.95 percent).

Conclusion

The investigator concluded that fertility-awareness methods of natural family planning were perceived as contributing positively to the marital relationship by 98 married couples who had used natural methods for an average of 1.76 years at the time of the study. Further exploration of the marriage-building potential of NFP should be carried out, ideally including some evaluation of the marital relationship prior to the use of natural methods and later following up the evaluation. Further studies should be done, too, on the relationships between the use of fertility-awareness methods, self-esteem, and the growth of caring relationships.

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Table 1
Reasons for Choosing Fertility-Awareness Methods

Response	f	%
Negative aspects of contraception (discomfort, undesirable effects, concern about safety, unspecified dislike)	68	28.10
Moral, religious, ethical reasons	36	14.88
Positive aspects (medically safe, easy, convenient, reliable)	33	13.64
Avoidance of pregnancy	20	8.26
Preference for a natural method	19	7.85
Changed from another natural method	19	7.85
Did not change—had always used fertility awareness	17	7.02
Spouse wanted to use the method	12	4.96
Recommended by others	6	2.48
Wished to achieve pregnancy	5	2.06
Did not answer question	4	1.65
Miscellaneous responses	3	1.24
Total Responses	242	99.99

First two raters agreed on all categories.

Table 2
Perceived Effect of Fertility Awareness on Self,
with Inter-Rater Agreement Frequencies

Response	2/2	2/3	f	%
<i>Negative Effect</i>				
Frustration; abstinence difficult	15	1	16	8.70
Worry more	3	1	4	2.17
Less spontaneous; cautious in expressing affection	2	1	3	1.63
Surprise pregnancy	2		2	1.09
Negative (unspecified)	1	1	2	1.09
Resent teaching of Church	1		1	.54
Negative effect on relationship	1		1	.54
Total negative responses	25	4	29	15.76
<i>Positive Responses</i>				
Greater self control, confidence, patience	52	1	53	28.80
More understanding of self, body; improved self-image	35		35	19.02
More understanding, appreciation of spouse	22		22	11.96
More appreciation, enjoyment, respect for sexuality	11		11	5.98
Spiritual reasons, morally right	10		10	5.43
More communication, sharing with spouse	5		5	2.72
Greater appreciation of family	4		4	2.17
More ways to express affection	3		3	1.63
Positive (unspecified)	4	1	5	2.72
Total positive responses	146	2	148	80.43
<i>Other Responses</i>				
Did not answer question	5		5	2.72
Did not know	1		1	.54
No change perceived	1		1	.54
Total other responses	7		7	3.80
Total Responses for Item	178	6	184	99.99

Table 3
Perceived Effect of Fertility Awareness on Spouse,
with Inter-Rater Agreement Frequencies

Response	2/2	2/3	f	%
<i>Negative Responses</i>				
Abstinence is destructive	17	1	18	10.40
Worry about effectiveness	13		13	7.51
Negative (unspecified)	6		6	3.47
Burden is on wife	2	1	3	1.73
Total negative responses	38	2	40	23.11
<i>Positive Responses</i>				
Increased love in relationship, more respect, more appreciation	27	1	28	16.18
More relaxed, less worry, more self- confidence	26	1	27	15.61
Greater appreciation, understanding, and enjoyment of sexuality	14	3	17	9.83
Greater understanding of body	16		16	9.25
Spiritual, moral values	13		13	7.51
Greater self control, improved self- image	7	1	8	4.62
Improved family relationships	7	1	8	4.62
Safer	6		6	3.47
Miscellaneous positive responses	4	1	5	2.89
Total positive responses	120	8	128	73.98
<i>Other Responses</i>				
No change perceived	2		2	1.16
Did not know	2		2	1.16
Did not answer question	1		1	.58
Total other responses				
Total Responses for Item	163	10	173	99.99

Table 4
Perceived Effect of the Use of Fertility-Awareness Methods
on the Marital Relationship, with Inter-Rater Agreement Frequencies

Response	2/2	2/3	f	%
<i>Negative Responses</i>				
Too much abstinence	12		12	4.80
Worry about pregnancy	9		9	3.60
Adds stress to marriage	7		7	2.80
Less spontaneity; feel pressure to have coitus when infertile	6	1	7	2.80
Would blame spouse for surprise pregnancy	3		3	1.20
Diminished sexual drive	1		1	.40
Total negative responses	38	1	39	15.60
<i>Positive Responses</i>				
Increased communication, love deepened	55	1	56	22.40
Increased awareness and appreciation of self, body, sexuality	39		39	15.60
Confidence in methods lessens worry	23		23	9.20
Abstinence makes sex more pleasurable	14		14	5.60
Share responsibility for fertility; attitude of responsible sexuality	13		13	5.20
Conscience eased, peace of mind	12		12	4.80
Personal growth, more patient	9		9	3.60
Positive, non-specific	5	1	6	2.40
No longer fear artificial means	4		4	1.60
Total positive responses	174	2	176	70.40
<i>Other Effects</i>				
Unchanged—relationship was always good, always used natural methods	29		29	11.60
Effect is minimal	3	1	4	1.60
Cannot answer due to other variables	2		4	.80
Total other responses	34	1	35	14.00
Total Responses to Item	246	4	250*	100.00

*Figure does not include 5 responses which did not answer question.

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