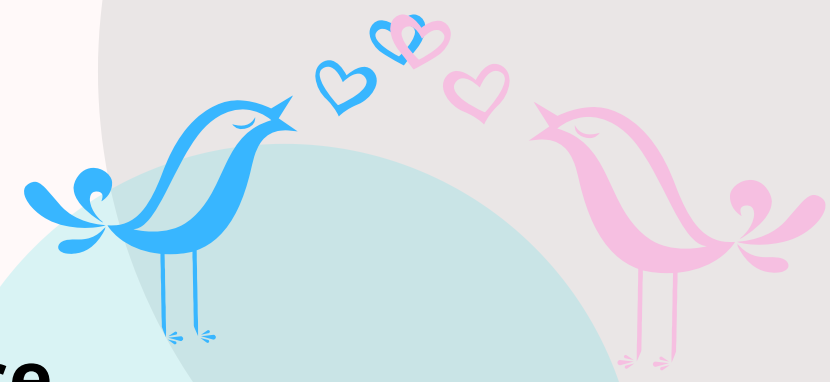




Behind Conjugal Harmony



17/5/2020

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Susu is a 28-year old teacher. It was the first time she came to our clinic last month.

Susu: *"Doctor, I have scoliosis. I heard that the sideways curvature of my spine can be corrected by surgery. Can you arrange the operation for me, please?"*

Although scoliosis is common in ladies, it occurs most often during the growth spurt just before puberty. In many cases, children who have mild scoliosis only require regular monitoring and no treatment is necessary. Some children will need to wear a brace to stop the curve from worsening. Surgical correction is only indicated for children with severe scoliosis which can be disabling, such as reducing the space in the chest and limit the lungs from proper functioning. Susu is already a mature adult with no more bone growth. This means under normal circumstances her scoliosis will not further worsen. Moreover, I could not see any obvious deformity when she walked into my consultation room. This is why I feel unusual to hear that she requested to have operation at the age of 28.

Doctor: *"Susu, when did you first notice that you have scoliosis?"*

Susu: *"Oh I have it since I was 8 years old. My doctor at that time had observed my condition for several years. Doctor said my curvature was considered as mild only without affecting my heart and lungs. As there was no worsening trend and was never noted by friends, I have nearly forgotten about it."*

Doctor: *"I see, then why it comes to your mind after a lapse of 20 years?"*

Susu hesitated and said: *"Someone has discovered it recently. Umm.... I guess it's better to have it corrected."*

Doctor: *" You just said that the curvature was so mild that no one notice about it in the past years. It sounds that this new 'friend' is very close and important to you."*

Susu: *"Well, she is my mother in-law."*

Doctor: *"Susu, are you married recently? Congratulations!"*


Susu showed a bit of embarrassment and said: *"I'm not yet married. However, I use to address the mother of my boyfriend as 'mother in-law'. My back problem was first noticed by my boyfriend, who then told his mum about it."*

Doctor: *"It sounds to me that your 'mother in-law' shows concern about your scoliosis problem. Does she have any underlying worries?"*

Susu: *"She said it will affect my fertility. This is why she still disapproves our marriage. Doctor, I'll be 29 very soon. You know, couples have to fight for booking banquet venues, wedding gowns, make-up artists, photographers as well as honeymoon arrangements on those auspicious dates at least one year in advance! If I do the operation now, I think I can marry on time before 30!"*

After I performed a physical examination with Susu, there was no clinical evidence that her mild scoliosis would affect her ability to give birth to baby.





Doctor: *“I can see that you very concern about your scoliosis condition. If necessary, of course I can refer you to seek for expert advice from orthopaedic specialist. However, it sounds to me that this issue involves your plan of marriage. Have you ever discussed with your boyfriend? Does he feel uneasy about your back condition?”*

Susu said in frustration: *“My boyfriend doesn’t mind about my scoliosis, but he does concern his mum’s view.”*

Doctor: *“Well, marriage is not that simple. We have to consider a lot of factors. As you two are planning to marry, I suggest you and your boyfriend to attend pre-marital body check and counselling. This can enhance mutual understanding and expectation to the marriage.”*

There is a Chinese idiom said *“One who is in the game is blind, while a bystander sees through everything.”* Is mild scoliosis the true reason for Susu’s “mother in-law” disapproving their marriage? After surgical correction, will Susu be accepted by this family? If the view of her future husband equals the view of his mother, will Susu be happy about this? Every family has its own way of dynamics among the family members. Perhaps there is no absolute right or wrong, it is a matter of acceptance or not, varying across different cultural background and social norms.

“A pair of phoenixes flying side by side in harmony” is a famous quote from the ancient Chinese Book of Poetry. It originally suggests a beautiful scene of conjugal harmony and is now often used as a wedding compliment. Back into reality, do most of the couples can simulate two phoenixes flying side by side in the sky, with same direction, height and speed in phase? The traditional Chinese culture expects a “good” wife to give birth and take care of her children, to serve her parents in-law as well as fulfilling the household duties, whereas a “responsible” husband is expected to have a favourable career and earning capability so that he can shoulder the family’s expenses. After all these years, do we still remember why we chose to marry initially? Was it because we could not stand loneliness and therefore comply to the “social script” to marry somebody at the “appropriate” age? Was it because we were expected to generate offspring, or to fulfil the wish of being a parent? If what we are expecting is a true love, involves mutual trust, respect, intimacy and similar spiritual values, no one can guarantee this Mr or Ms Right can appear before the so-called “appropriate” age for marriage. What we need is living in the present moment and strengthen our own life values, so that when he or she comes, we shall not miss each other.

Years ago I heard an experienced counsellor said *“The principle of conjugal harmony is to ‘tolerate’ the other half.”* I believe the key of this principle depends on the definition of the word ‘tolerate’. Does it mean unconditional love, care and acceptance? Or, record a long list of wrongdoing of the other half in the “family ledger”, and voice it out after the children all grown up 30 years later? Perhaps there is no model answer, as we may only know our own answer with continuous self-reflection – *What we want, and what we can give?*

(This article is translated from the original Chinese article “鳳凰于飛” by the original author on 17 May 2020.)

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