

# Chapter 3

## Promoting Spiritual Health: Using Poetry as a Coping Strategy for Iranian Women Post-divorce



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### 3.1 Divorce as a Complex Life Event

Divorce has many facets. In the legal sense, divorce is defined as the end of the formal contract of a marriage (Putnam 2011). Scholars use the term to refer to a couple's separation and as a socially constructed experience that affects the whole family (Harold and Leve 2018; Leturcq and Panico 2019; Xerxa et al. 2019). Depending on the social and cultural context, the divorce process can be more or less complicated and stressful. In Iran, the process is extremely complex for women. First, a submission of a divorce registration request might not be accepted if submitted by a woman; the experience of filing is determined by the petitioner's gender role (Habibi et al. 2015). Ending a marriage might be simple and quick, or it might be time-consuming, overwhelming, and tedious. Although divorce laws continue to favor men, women are increasingly initiating divorces (Moghadam 2004). While inequity exists in the structures determining legal divorce proceedings, this increase serves as a sign that traditional marriage is changing as women gain equality. According to a study that explored the perspectives of women who experienced Iran's judiciary in divorce proceedings, custody and dowry concerns, and family court alimony, Iranian women identified low levels of legal awareness, the experience of post-divorce poverty, and low self-esteem because of the patriarchal hegemonic structure as the major barriers in their access to family justice (Bahar et al. 2018).

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### ***3.1.1 Divorce in Iran***

Over the last two decades, divorce rates in Iran have been rising (Bolhari et al. 2012). In 2009, the divorce rate was 17%, rising to 29% 8 years later in 2017 (Jafarian Dehkordi and Amiri 2018). During the years 2004–2010, most of the women in Iran experiencing divorce were aged 20–24 years, while the average age for men was 25–29 years (Jafarian Dehkordi and Amiri 2018). These figures reflect that Iranian women get married younger and also experience divorce earlier than men.

### ***3.1.2 Factors Contributing to Divorce***

Research has identified numerous factors contributing to divorce, including economic, psychosocial, and social issues (Ardi and Maizura 2018; Pirak et al. 2019; Raley and Sweeney 2020). Financial difficulties such as rising costs of housing, high unemployment rates, and inflation can contribute to divorce. Economic hardship adds stress and increases the risk of marital conflict and the likelihood of marriage dissolution (Sadeghi and Agadjanian 2019). Other risk factors are psychosocial and social, including a lack of compatibility and understanding, not meeting partners' psychological needs, domestic violence, personality conflict, gender inequality, problems with children, lack of responsibility, family interference, cultural differences, education level differences, drugs and alcohol use, infidelity, and sexual dissatisfaction (Jafarian Dehkordi and Amiri 2018).

## **3.2 Post-divorce Life Among Iranian Women**

In Iran, as in several other contexts, divorce represents a family and social crisis. Divorce causes family imbalances and a loss of family stability, and often damages family members' health and psychological well-being (Robinson 2018). The impacts of divorce are not necessarily felt equitably by all family members. Indeed, Iranian studies have shown that divorced women may face far more challenges and obstacles than divorced men (Bahar et al. 2018; Nikparvar et al. 2017; Pirak et al. 2019; Zagami et al. 2019) and experience more problems such as depression, social isolation, and poverty that threaten their well-being (Zare et al. 2017). Context also plays a role in the socially constructed meaning of divorce. For instance, in Iran, research has found that the stigma assigned to a divorced woman can impact her social dignity and can lead to her exclusion from society (Zare et al. 2017; Zarei et al. 2017). Iranian women often experience divorce as a socially excluding process. They may experience post-divorce discrimination when seeking occupational opportunities, weakened social ties, lack of family and social support, social and family ostracism, and health issues (Merghati-Khoei et al. 2014).

On a personal level, divorce also affects Iranian women's sexual well-being. Findings from a study in Iran by Zarei et al. (2013) revealed how societal discrimination, women's perceptions, and post-divorce life experiences combine to informally regulate women's sexual lives and silence the expression of their sexuality. The study found that women's sexuality is highly influenced by societal scripts and by the expectation for women that post-divorce life should proceed without expression of their sexuality. The authors argued that the root of the regulatory and ideological ambivalence toward divorced women's sexuality lies in the male-dominant structure of Iranian society. In a culture where silence, sexual purity, chastity, and women's sexual repression are highly valued, few women will risk their social reputation. Instead, they conform their sexual lives to fit the dominant framework of society, and their sexual health and well-being is ignored. The lived experiences of Iranian women reveal that divorce is a much more complicated issue than the simple separation of two people, and goes beyond individualistic and psychological outcomes (Pirak et al. 2019). Therefore, identifying, understanding, and planning for divorce and its resulting consequences require a deeper and more deliberate view that is informed by these lived perceptions and experiences.

### ***3.2.1 Post-divorce Life Adjustment: Developing Personal Skills***

Developing personal skills is one of the five key action areas for health promotion identified in the Ottawa Charter to empower individuals to give them more control over their health (World Health Organization 1986). Developing personal skills includes the development of health literacy, basic motor skills, and an awareness of the connections between risk behaviors and disease. It encourages protective behaviors and builds knowledge to better navigate the health system and to analyze health information critically. However, developing personal skills is not just about physical health, specific skills, and knowledge. It also aims to promote lifelong learning that enables individuals to harness health as a resource for their lives. This implies that knowledge and skills relevant to social settings, family contexts, spiritual issues, life purpose, and mental and emotional stability are all components of personal skill development (World Health Organization 1986)

As the number of marriages ending in divorce in Iran has increased, post-divorce life adjustment has become a major concern for a larger number of impacted women. Any support for this transition requires attention to socio-cultural and psychological perspectives to ensure culturally appropriate coping strategies. Commonly prescribed strategies such as stress management, relaxation methods, yoga, and meditation (Rosario and Leite 2019) may support psychological well-being; however, these strategies offer little support for coping with the complex cultural concerns divorced women might face in Iran. In other words, a new perspective about post-divorce life difficulties may be needed to provide a more holistic and effective personal coping strategy.

### 3.3 Meaning-Making and Spiritual Health: An Under-examined Concept in Health Promotion

A spiritual engagement with the world can be important for human health (Kristeller 2010). Life satisfaction is one aspect of spiritual health, and finding meaning in life events can be a pathway toward life satisfaction (Linley and Joseph 2011; Steger and Frazier 2005). In general, spiritual engagement includes a sense of connection to something greater than oneself, and it typically involves a search for meaning in life (Mueller et al. 2001).

The *existential paradigm* and *Logotherapy approach* as a treatment in psychiatry suggest that the primary motivational force of an individual is to find meaning in life. The prominent leaders of existentialism—such as Viktor E. Frankl in 1946, Erich Seligmann Fromm in 1953, and Irvin Yalom in 1980—argued that existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the individual’s existence, freedom, and choice. *Existentialism* is the view that human beings define their own meanings in life, and try to make rational decisions despite living in an irrational universe. According to the *Logotherapy approach* introduced in 1946 by Frankl, meaning in life can be discovered in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering, asserting that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances” (Frankl 1967, p. 138–142)

Given the social context, stigma, and suffering many Iranian women endure after divorce, a strategy for promoting meaning-making and spiritual health, rather than stress reduction activities done in isolation, might better equip them to transition to their new lives.

#### 3.3.1 *Art as an Effective Personal Development Strategy*

Art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination. Art produces ideas and artifacts to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power (Davies et al. 2015; see also Chap. 1, in this volume). Poetry is one of the literary art forms. Marjorie Perloff, the American poetry scholar and critic, said “poetry compares present to past, divulges some hidden emotion, or comes to a new understanding of the situation” (Perloff 2002, p.7–43). This means that poetry conjures images in the mind and creates new ways to experience the world and express thoughts. One can convert these mental images into meaningful and understandable concepts.

Given these attributes, poetry is an art form particularly suited to affect awareness, attitude, and beliefs at both individual and societal levels. Kazemek et al. (2004) explored an ongoing project where, through poetry, oral history, and

storytelling, children and young adults with particular emotional and learning needs were connected to older mentors. The research highlights the literary and personal benefits for all the participants in intergenerational exchanges facilitated through engagement with the arts. Art has been significant in human societies throughout history. It is rooted in culture and reflects the values and beliefs of the culture that produced it. Known as the birthplace of poetry (Roohollah 2018; Rypka 2013), poetry has been a significant outlet for emotional and thought expression in Iran since ancient times. Iranian poets, such as Hafez, Saadi, Ferdowsi, and Rumi, are known globally for writing poetry that conveys love and resentment, anger and frustration, as well as other feelings linked to private or national interests (Sen Nag 2019).

Rumi, in particular, has remained relevant over time. The French Iranologist Henri Massé (1886–1969), in comparing the four Iranian poets mentioned above to other well-known poets, concluded that Rumi cannot be compared to anyone in this world (Ghahremani 2016; ParsToday 2017; Rozina 2017). Yosefi, an Iranian literary critic, in the book *Cheshmeh Roshan [Bright Fountain]*, points out that “Rumi is unique and will remain unique. He is not only a poet but rather a sociologist and especially a psychologist who exactly knows human nature...” (Yosefi 2018, p. 207).

### 3.3.1.1 The Work of Rumi

Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, also known popularly as Rumi (1207–1273), was a thirteenth-century Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic. Rumi’s works are written mainly in Persian, but occasionally he also used Turkish, Arabic, and Greek in his poems.

During the last 25 years of his life, Rumi composed over 70,000 verses of poetry collected in six distinct volumes. His poetry illuminates a diversity of topics, covering deep philosophical and mystical issues; fiery expressions of passionate love filled with yearning and desire; and more didactically framed verses filled with anecdotes, lessons for living, moral stories, stories from all three Abrahamic religions, popular topics of the day, and even satirical tales.

Rumi proposes that the difficulties humans encounter and overcome can lead to growth while encouraging a letting go of dependency. In other words, breaking from the shackles of our ego [egoistic attachments] may promote growth. While promoting spiritual reflection, Rumi’s poems transcend religion and ethnicity. Lastly, Rumi’s poems are mystical<sup>1</sup> (De Bruijn 2014; Lewis 2014)—that is, his poems embrace spiritual concepts that involve the contemplation of an individual’s understanding of and connection to meaning beyond themselves (Yosefi 2018).

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<sup>1</sup>One of the most helpful expressions of the internal experiences of a mystic is mystical poetry. By nature, a mystic can access a state of consciousness beyond humanity’s usual consciousness.

### 3.4 Describing the Initiative

The present chapter describes a creative initiative that involved using the poetry of Rumi to promote health and well-being through meaning-making for Iranian women during their transition to post-divorce life. The general goal of the project was to promote and develop personal skills among divorced women through poetry reading sessions, which focused on the works of Rumi. The philosophy behind the initiative was to introduce Rumi's poetry to divorced women to encourage broadening their perspectives about the problems presented in post-divorce life and to help them explore the meaning of their life events and their futures.

In 2016, a group of 25 divorced women aged 25–55 were recruited to participate in the project through a safe-community center, established in 2010, in the west part of Tehran. The eligibility requirements for participation were being legally divorced, literate, and living in Tehran. Participants in the study had at least a high school education. Most were living in rental houses alone, and a few of were living with their relatives at the time of conducting the current project. The women mainly resided in district 21 of Tehran<sup>2</sup> and were referred to “The Office of Vice President for Women and Family Affairs” to be provided with ongoing financial support. Those eligible for this social program were facing unemployment, poverty, being a single parent, and being divorced or widowed. In addition to providing financial support, this safe-community center gives workshops for developing life skills, as well as psychological counseling.

The intervention included 15 one-hour sessions held weekly and conducted in Persian. The participants were encouraged to speak freely and share their perceptions of Rumi verses. The meetings were led by two health promotion experts and a Persian literature specialist with expertise on interpretation of Rumi's poems. Each session consisted of reading Rumi's poetry and then engaging in a dialogue on relevant concepts such as meaning of life, contentment, and acceptance and how those concepts were connected with post-divorce life. The Persian literature specialist read the poems and highlighted some of the relevant concepts contained in the verses for 15 minutes. Each participant was provided with a copy of *Masnavi*, a poetry book by Rumi, to follow along with the literature instructor. Then, in collaboration with the health promotion specialists, the participants extracted the underlying meanings from the poems and interpreted them for 30 minutes. The last 15 minutes of each session were allotted to the sharing of participants' own experiences. In this last part, as participants described their stories, other participants often took part in this emotional storytelling by showing feelings such as excitement and empathy, and sometimes even crying. At the end of each meeting, the literature specialist would often introduce a relevant book or novel to improve the participants' understanding of the concepts discussed. A novel<sup>3</sup> by the Turkish author Elif Shafak, which discusses a compelling, dramatic, and exuberant account of how love works in the world, was also read by the participants.

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<sup>2</sup>Tehran is divided into 22 districts.

<sup>3</sup>*The Forty Rules of Love*, a novel about Rumi's life.

### 3.5 Iranian Women Post-divorce: Lived Experience

The following results describe the lived experiences of women who shared their stories of post-divorce life in our meeting sessions.

One prominent theme in the early discussions centered on the women's feelings of unfairness toward their situation. These participants lamented their experiences of separation, divorce, and its consequences. They described feeling that divorce was a disaster that had ruined their lives and that no reconstruction was ever possible. Consequently, these women felt hopelessness toward the future and resisted the idea of reconstructing their attitudes about their post-divorce life.

Divorce is like a robber that destroys life and cannot make this life again (35-year-old divorced woman).

Moreover, they revealed that one of the more frequent feelings they experienced was hopelessness.

When I got divorced, I had no hope to continue life. My daughter, my friends, all abandoned me. You know why, because I was not credible anymore (40-year-old divorced woman).

Shock, fear, anxiety, depression, anger, frustration, and bitterness are difficult and common feelings in post-divorce life (Ardi and Maizura 2018). When it comes to divorce and hopelessness, participants expressed a feeling of being powerless, unable to change the way things were.

The fear of living alone after divorce was one of the most common psychological concerns expressed by the participants. They believed it would be very difficult to afford daily expenses and to perform their daily activities.

After divorce I began living with my old mother. My only wish is to die before her. If she dies before me, I will have no one to talk with, as my family died in Bam earthquake (39-year-old divorced woman).

Negative thoughts are a normal part of divorce (Ardi and Maizura 2018). Even in the best of times, all people have negative thoughts. However, in the case of getting divorced, negative thoughts and rumination can take over. These people become trapped in a world of fears.

What if this happens or that happens? Of course, this [divorce] is something really, really unfortunate (34-year-old divorced woman).

Participants believed that divorce would stigmatize them socially. Feelings of fear of social labels originating from the cultural concept of divorce was another obstacle they described.

I think divorce is a type of disease, like cancer. So, merely being a divorcee is not a sufficient justification for labeling. I will be stigmatized for divorce as well (35-year-old divorced woman).

It seems that some psycho-socio-cultural predisposing factors affect post-divorce life. In other words, the participants believed that their life after divorce had been influenced by their lived experiences, including feelings of frustration, hopeless-

ness, stigmatization, and isolation. Thus, familiarizing them with post-divorce coping strategies incorporating a spiritual perspective would be helpful.

### ***3.5.1 Meaning-Making: Engaging with Rumi***

One theme explored in many ways in Rumi's poetry is that finding meaning in life provides satisfaction. In other words, a divorced woman who can find meaning in her unavoidable suffering can begin to move on and see purpose for her life in the future. Satisfaction with herself and her life can then emerge and lead to a sense of peace and well-being.

## **3.6 Participants' Experiences in the Program**

We asked participants at the end of each session to provide feedback on their feelings and perceptions. Two primary questions were asked. We categorized participant's perceptions in three ways according to logotherapy approach (see Sect. 3.3) which focused on developing participant's personal skills in health promotion area.

### **The Attitude Toward Divorce**

The first related to their feelings and perceptions of the significance derived from Rumi's poetry: Is divorce still a misfortune?

...Rumi's poetry has [an] effect on me. I found that every event on Earth is purposefully designed. Separation and divorce are no exception to this rule for me (37-year-old divorced woman).

Other women responded:

Honestly, I was never sure I could stand on my feet again after I got divorced. I had a lot of problems (after the divorce). Now I found that divorce has taught me a lesson. So I would rather accept all outcomes from divorce—loneliness, stigma, and even rejection—because in Rumi's poems I realized that even a misery is the basis for self-development and growth (41-year-old divorced woman).

...recently I found that's why nothing ever made me contented. I carried prejudice about the meaning of divorce. I had perceived divorce from my family's perspective. They still find divorce taboo. Now I feel free and think of the divorce as a magic box that should be explored (40-year-old divorce woman).

### **Experiencing Divorce**

We also asked them to describe their experiences related to divorce and explain their reflections after considering and discussing Rumi's poetry.

...Looking deeper into this experience, I find that before the divorce, my relationship with my daughter had faded because my mind was so busy and focused on my relationship with my ex-husband. But the divorce made me pay more attention to my daughter and listen to



her more. I have to appreciate this experience [Divorce] because it highlighted the role of motherhood in me. (39-year-old divorce woman)

Well, I believe there were a lot of possibilities for my personal development after my divorce. I continued my education and attended university. Actually, 'divorce' was meaningful for my life (44-year-old divorced woman).

### Goal Setting

Actually, I don't have a particular job right now and I live with my old mother. I always wanted to be a hairdresser, but my ex-husband objected. I'm going to learn a hairdressing course so I can make money. (43-year-old divorce woman)

I am a young woman and I am capable of childbearing. I can help an infertile couple have children by donating my eggs [ovules]. I couldn't have children because my husband was infertile. We tried several treatments, but they were fruitless. Lastly, we decided to get divorce. Now I think I can be mother of several children if I stop being selfish. (34-year-old divorce woman)

## 3.7 Conclusion

Health has cultural dimensions, and addressing an individual's health challenges through means of empowerment and behavior change without acknowledging cultural components is unproductive (Norbeck and Lock 2019). Undoubtedly, the process of empowering individuals through culturally sensitive health education in creative and indirect ways can be effective. As theorized in Chap. 21 of this volume, art that is rooted in history and culture can provide a pathway to wellbeing by supporting understanding of oneself in relation to one's context and to a sense of broader meaning. Poetry and literature are powerful tools in teaching health concepts due to their cultural and metaphorical nature. In fact, developing personal skills is assumed to improve health directly by facilitating an informed use of health care and indirectly by encouraging healthy habits and behaviors (Mirowsky 2017).

Returning to the concept of existentialism, this program supported participants as they discovered their own meanings in post-divorce life in three ways: by motivating them to create or act; by helping them accept or cope with difficulties and stressors; and by modifying their attitudes and perceptions of their experience of suffering after divorce. The incorporation of art in this program supported participants in developing a belief that life satisfaction is one aspect of spiritual health, and finding meaning in life events such as divorce can be a pathway toward life satisfaction. The women identified and accepted the difficulties they experienced while finding meaning from post-divorce suffering. Participants reported experiencing a greater sense of peace, tranquility, and well-being, and an openness to envisioning a purpose for the future. This program stimulated dialogue about coping strategies for life post-divorce through the explanation and interpretation of concepts explored in the verses. This project revealed that the use of art, and poetry specifically, can be

a viable approach to promoting health among Iranian women who have experienced divorce.

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