

Religion & Relationships

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When David and Leah decided to get married, they had never even been on a first date. They'd never kissed, or even held hands. They weren't in love, and they had known each other for less than a month.

David and Leah, both sophomores in biology, met at a Muslim Student Association meeting last semester; she was the president, he the vice president. A month and a half later, when most couples might have just gotten around to Campaniling, they tied the knot.

Now, the five-month newlyweds sit in the living room of their apartment and explain how in the Islamic religion, "dating" is nonexistent.


"The initial love you have for somebody changes over time and it becomes less and a different kind of love comes up," David says. "... For us, we see if we're compatible. We decide to get married before we fall in love. We don't fall in love before marriage."

When asked for the date of their wedding, David laughs and looks sheepishly at his wife. She smiles and reminds him, "We had our Islamic Nikah on October 17, and then a week later we did the legal process, but we didn't decide to move in together until Nikah is December 24." the Islamic religious ceremony, and before moving in together, David and Leah had a Rukhsati, which is a separate Pakistani cultural process.

"Islamically speaking, you shouldn't wait to fall in love with someone," explains David. "When you feel like you're ready to be married, you should ask around and find the right wife ... We got married for the sake of our religion, basically."

Instead of dating, Muslims practice courtships, where two people meet in a supervised environment and determine if they match or not. Typically the couple decides the same day if they'll marry or not.

"In our religion, it's a really big sin [to have dated other people before marriage]," David says seriously.



After just six weeks of courting, David and Leah got married

Nodding in agreement, Leah explains, "[In] courting, our intention from the very beginning is marriage, and it's more serious ... Dating is not like that. You're not really sure if it's going to lead to marriage or not. Because in dating you're more emotionally attached to people, it can lead to more heartbreak as well. In the Islamic culture, in courting, after you get to know the person, you marry them and then you get closer."

David is Iranian and American; Leah is Pakistani. In both Iran and Pakistan, most marriages are arranged by the couple's family.

With charisma typical of the twenty-year-old, David describes arranged marriages as a "human version of Match.com," meaning family members partner couples whose values and personalities after meeting a prospective match, the candidates still have the final say.

"There are arranged marriages and there are also forced marriages," Leah says, "and I think the [negative] perception of arranged marriages comes from the two getting mixed up."

The Iranian and Pakistani cultures are similar, which is one of the things David and Leah found they had in common when they first met. The most important similarity between David and Leah, however, is their shared belief in Islam. It was this belief that brought them together in the first place.

"Islamically speaking," David explains, "you're supposed to get married as soon as possible. As soon as you think you are mature enough to be with another person, you should get married, because marriage is considered half of our religion."

Following closely behind religion on their priority list is family, so "meeting the parents" is an even bigger deal to Muslims.

"That's very important in both of our cultures," David says of Pakistan and Iran. "If the families don't agree, you're not going to get married ... Our cultures and our life revolves around family, so if your family isn't there, you have nothing, so your families have to get along."

Luckily for David and Leah, their families hit it off.

David admits that although he was ready for marriage when he met Leah, he didn't feel like he was quite mature enough yet.

"That's why it took so long for me," he says of their unusually "long" one-and-a-half month courtship.

During their courtship, David and Leah were not allowed to meet without

the supervision of a family member.

"We have a saying in Islam that whenever a girl and boy are alone in a room, Satan is their third," David says.

David and Leah honored this rule, for the most part. Once, they met for coffee at the very crowded Caribou.

"In Iran it probably wouldn't be okay," David says, "but here, it's America."

"It was a public place," Leah quickly adds, a little embarrassed, "and we didn't do anything bad, either."

This rule, which is part of the Islamic culture, is to prevent the temptation of physical contact.

"Before marriage, you cannot physically touch each other," Leah says. "No holding hands, nothing. After Nikah,"

...you can do whatever," finishes David.

Muslims are not even supposed to shake hands with a member of the opposite sex, other than each other and close family, of course. They're also not supposed to be friends with members of the opposite sex or be around a member of the opposite sex who is not their spouse. Between school and work, however, sometimes this becomes unavoidable.

"She gets jealous a lot, actually," David teases his wife. "Well, with my looks..."

"I don't get jealous," Leah says, rolling her eyes a little. "He might like to think so."

“Before marriage, you cannot physically touch each other.”

"Leah, why are you wearing your hijab?" asks David suddenly, as if just noticing the blue and green scarf covering his wife's hair.

"I feel like it," laughs Leah shyly. "I didn't do my hair."

David explains that in Islam, the head scarf is only to be worn around men other than the woman's husband, father or close relative. It is not a requirement for all Muslim women to wear a hijab; Leah started wearing one in ninth grade, after she started going to the mosque, or Muslim church, in Ames.

"I think it was one of the best decisions of my life [to wear a hijab]," Leah states confidently. "... At first I was very against it and thought it was oppressing women, but then as I looked more into it I realized

it was more liberating. People look at who you are: your personality and your actions. They judge you by that, not by the way you look. It makes you less of a shallow person."

David adds that it's more important to cover and hide the shape of your body—whether you are male or female.

Wearing a hijab can come at a cost, though. Muslim women who don the traditional head-scarf are more recognizable as a part of Islam, and they're sometimes treated with anger and hostility.

David says his sister and mother have been yelled at and called terrorists by strangers on the street in Branson, Missouri.

"I don't mind myself," David says calmly. "It just shows ignorance. I'm more worried about my wife and my sister's feelings getting hurt. If you actually study our religion, all it does is encourage peace."

Leah says she hasn't experienced any problems with it in Iowa, because people here seem to be more open-minded and polite.

In their fifth month of marriage and third month of living together, Leah says they've grown a lot closer and learned each other's likes and dislikes.

"I'll tell you what I don't like," interjects David, laughing, "Pakistani food!"

Leah giggles and says, "Before we moved in together he couldn't say that, but now that we live together he's a lot more honest."

David and Leah realize that their marriage seems unorthodox to many American couples, but they believe their culture's customs are more practical than Hollywood's over-romanticized idea of love and "Mr. Right."

"We were really passionate about each other before we got married," reminisces David, "but it was very different from the American style. This type of love is much better—the love that takes time. With courtship, with patience. You rely on each other; you depend on each other. To me, this is more like a soul mate. Someone proves to you they will always be there for you. To me that is more precious than the Hollywood style."

Leah sits, smiling and listening to her husband before realizing it is her turn to say something.

"What was the question?" she asks.

"My words just swept her away," David jokes. 