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Natural Family Planning (NFP): The Symptothermal Method (Rötzer)
as a Family Binding Tool.
Results of a Survey among Members of INER.

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Natural Family Planning (NFP): The Symptothermal Method (Rötzer) as a Family Binding Tool.

Results of a Survey among Members of INER.

In 2008, on behalf of the marriage- and family centers of the Austrian dioceses Salzburg and Feldkirch and by the Institute for Natural Regulation of Conception (INER), Vöcklabruck, Austria, a survey concerning the performance of natural regulation of conception and its potential influence on family life and spousal relations was conducted among members of INER, a group of declared users and teachers of the method. Questionnaires were mailed to 1131 members in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy (region of Alto Adige). The return rate was 43.5%.

The results support earlier publications indicating that natural family planning (NFP) is associated with positive spousal relationships and family stability. NFP, here specifically the symptothermal method after J. Rötzer, improves the communication and the mutual respect between the spouses. It is associated with a low divorce rate (3%). This rate is not only associated with the religious practice but may be a consequence of living this method per se. Surprisingly, periodical continence is regarded as beneficial by a majority of respondents, and it seems to keep the joy in sexuality maintained.

Since the method is free of any undesirable side effects, and associated with a favourable Pearl Index, it should become known on a broader base.

Key words: NFP (natural family planning), symptothermal method (Roetzer), family life, divorce rate.

Background

The symptothermal method (STM) is one of several methods of natural family planning. It is based on the combined observation of the secretion of cervical mucus and the waking body-temperature as a mean of birth regulation. In western countries, the method has gained moderate attention since its introduction in 1965 by Josef Rötzer [1], and is, e.g., used in Austria by less than 5% of the population [2]. In contrast to other natural methods, the method after Rötzer attaches importance to living periodical abstinence in the few days of fertility if responsibility for a child could not be taken.

In 2008, an international survey was performed among the German speaking members of INER (Institute of natural conception regulation) most of whom are also teaching this method.

Materials and Methods

A survey was conducted between July and December 2008. Among other topics, the questionnaire aimed at clarifying to what extent the members of INER really perform the method by themselves and whether the method per se may have an influence on family life and on the quality of spousal relationships. The survey has been initiated by the marriage- and family centers of the two Austrian dioceses Salzburg and Feldkirch and by the Institute for Natural Regulation of Conception (INER), located in Vöcklabruck, Austria.

The sympto-thermal method (STM)

The method is based on the combined measurement of the so called basal body-temperature and the observation of the secretion of cervical mucus at the vagina. The basal body temperature has to be taken as wake up-temperature in the morning. In contrast to other natural methods, the method after Roetzer attaches importance to living periodical abstinence in the few days of fertility if responsibility for a child could not be taken. The duration of fertile days of a menstrual cycle can be limited to a maximum of 8 days. On condition that records on the menstrual cycle are kept and the known rules are observed, the method reaches a high reliability with a Pearl Index of 0.0 to 0.9. The method can easily be learned by most people but it demands some advise and training lessons [details in 3]. Usually, the necessary observations soon become routine and take only few minutes a day.

Data collection and response

Envelopes with two questionnaires at a time were mailed to 1131 members of INER who resided in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy (region of Alto Adige) in July 2008. The questionnaires contained 14 questions with 37 items at 4 pages, respectively, which covered gender, age, education, employment, finances, civil status, number of children, religious confession, religious practice, practice of the symptothermal method (STM), some consequences of living the STM and family life. There was space for remarks or comments at the end of the questionnaire. The evaluation was restricted to answers which have been returned to the end of December 2008.

At the end of December 2008, 491 envelopes with 811 questionnaires filled out have been returned corresponding to a response rate of 43.5%. Fifty-eight percent of the responders (n=473) used the possibility to make comments or remarks.

Characteristics of the responders

Answers came from 332 males (41%) and 479 women (59%). The median age group was that between 40 and 49 years. Education was of higher degree among the responders (Table 1). Ninety-nine percent of the answers were evaluable in this respect.

Table 1. Education as given in the completed questionnaires (801 of 811 possible answers)

| | All responders | Women only |
|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| Primary school | 80 (10%) | 40 (9%) |
| Technical college | 401 (50%) | 263 (55%) |
| University | 320 (40%) | 171 (36%) |

The vast majority (96%) of the respondents said they were very content (46%) or content (50%) with their professional life, only 4% denied that. The financial situation was described as balanced by 83%, as tense by 16% and plight by 1% of the asked sample.

Ninety-one percent were married, 3% single, 3% divorced, 2% cohabitating, and 1% widowed; 97% of the married people had a church wedding. The median duration of the marriages was 20 years (range, 0.1 – 50). Premartial sexual relations to other partners were stated by 29% of the couples. The median number of children was 3 (range, 0 – 11).

Religious confession

The survey participants stated to be roman catholic in 74%, protestant in 20%, to have other confessions in 4% and to be without confession in 2%. There was no substantial difference between males and females but there were significant differences in the distribution of confessions between the countries, eg. 95% roman catholics in Austria vs 49% in Switzerland.

A score-system for religious behaviour

For assessing the religious behaviour, the respondents were allocated to a score-system according to their answers relating to the performance of three main religious activities: Church attendance, personal prayer and prayer together with the spouse (Table 2).

Table 2. A score-system for religious practice of the respondents

| | Regular | Occasionally | Rarely | Never |
|---|----------|--------------|---------|----------|
| Church attendance | 4 points | 2 points | 1 point | No point |
| Personal prayer | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Prayer together with the spouse (partner) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

Score I : 8 – 12 points; optimal religious practice*

Score II : 4 – 7 points; intermediate religious practice

Score III: 0 – 3 points; non-optimal religious practice

*) To achieve Score I, at least church attendance and personal prayer had to reach 4 points.

Results

Reasons to have chosen NFP/STM for conception regulation

Figure 1 shows 92% of the answers to the question: What was your motivation to choose a NFP-method for birth control ?

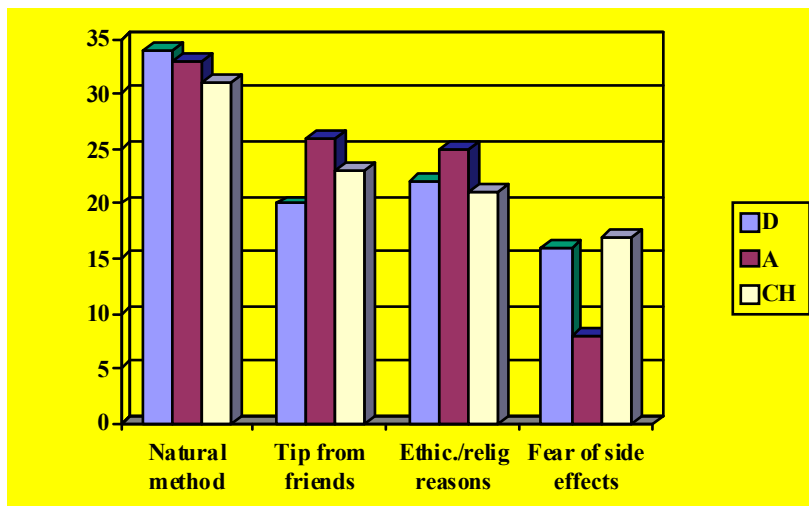


Fig.1: Reasons to have chosen STM for conception regulation. (Numbers are percentages).
D = Germany, A = Austria, CH = Switzerland.

Other reasons were advices by medical personnel, wish to have children, reading the respective literature, or problems with artificial contraceptive methods. Only 5% of the surveyed persons received informations on NFP/STM within a “preparation-course for marriage”.

Practicing the method

The authentic sympto-thermal method (STM) was lived by 83% of the answering women, 12% did it from time to time, and 5% did not practice it. The median time of practicing the method was 17 years (range, 0 – 37), the median time of written records on the menstrual cycle was likewise 17 years (range, 1 – 40). Nevertheless, 40% of the inquired women admitted to have used also artificial contraception at a time during their present marriage. This, however, is seemingly a contradiction, it will be discussed below.

Communication and satisfaction in family life

The survey revealed that 61% of the respondents associated NFP/STM with an enrichment of the personal relation to the marriage partner, and 63% meant the family life became more pleasant and nicely by living NFP/STM. The communication with the partners was improved in the opinion of 61% of the inquired persons. Fifteen percent denied this, and 24% said <I do not know>. In this context, 1.4 % of the respondents commented on these two questions by stating that it was not easy to answer these questions since the communication and/or their family life were satisfying since the beginning of the marriage, and, therefore, no comparison was possible for them. – It was quite clear, however, that living NFP/STM opened up the possibility of having talks about sexuality with the partner: 85% said <yes> to this question, 15% denied it. The rate of evaluable answers was 97% (763 answers).

Periodical abstinence associated with STM

A correlation between continence, family life and number of children is shown in Table 3: The corresponding question of the survey was: Did you behave continent if you could not take responsibility for a further child? The answers “yes” and “no” were related to different parameters of family life.

Table 3. Continence related to partner relationship, family life, and numbers of children (only answers by women were considered)

| Periodical abstinence | NFP/STM has enriched the partnership | Family life became more pleasant | Number of children, mean (range) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Yes: 360 | 71 % | 68 % | 3.14 (0 – 11) |
| No: 60 | 51 % (p=0.05) | 50 % | 2.5 |

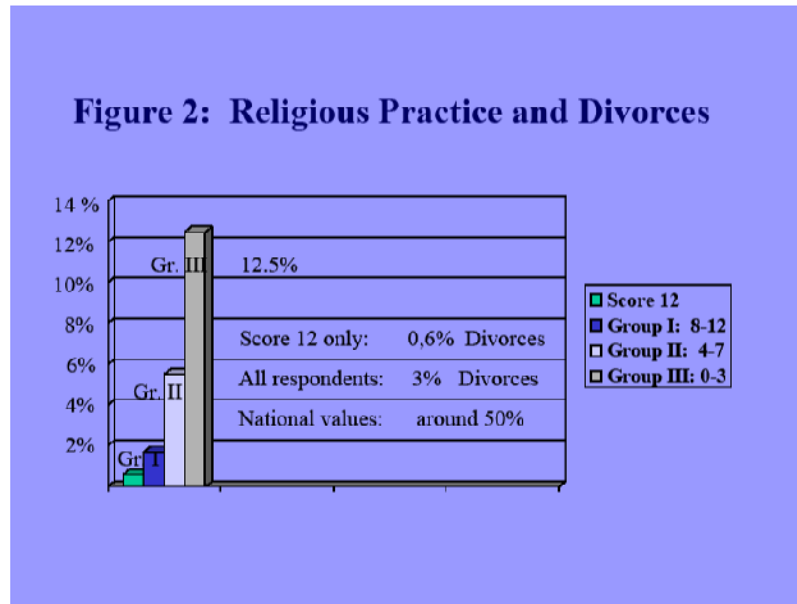
Rather surprising was the outcome to the question: Do you experience – despite a higher demand – the periodic sexual abstinence as positive? Agreement came from 592 persons (82%), denial from 87 (12%). Only 40 persons (6%) felt that the STM (Rötzer) is hardly to live. The rate of evaluable answers to this question was 92%.

Divorce rates

A divorce has been reported by 25 persons, 11 men and 14 women corresponding to a 3% divorce rate. Divorces were not related to the religious confession but to some extent to the religious behaviour. Marriages were divorced after a median time of 12 years (range, 1-26). Among the subgroup of divorced couples some interesting trends and features were observed: They had a median number of 2 children (range, 2 – 6). Only half of the divorced persons (12) practiced NFP, 1 couple did it in part.

Artificial conception methods within the marriage were used by 17 inquired divorced persons, 5 denied this and 3 did not answer. So, the use of artificial birth control in 17 of 22 evaluable respondents (77%) is much more frequent compared to the whole sample (40%).

Figure 2 shows the percentages of divorces in relation to the religious practice according to the score system described above. It is not surprising to see a correlation between an optimal religious practice and a low divorce rate but it is noteworthy to realize the divorce rate of 12.5% among people with a “non-optimal religious practice” (score III). Such a number is still far below the average values in the German speaking European countries.



Voluntary comments

Periodical continence associated with STM was mentioned in 31.5% of the comments given by women. The vast majority regarded the continence as being favourable for two reasons: First, it seemed to be convenient for some women not permanently to be at the partners disposal, and secondly, periodical abstinence strongly enhances the anticipation and excitement in the eyes of these women (many husbands shared this latter view but not expressly the first one). The tenor of these comments may be summarized as follows: “STM with lived continence keeps the joy in sexuality maintained”.

Discussion

The sample size of this survey seems to be sufficient. Of course, this is a selected population of persons who stand behind the symptothermal method, having a higher education and a Christian religious background. The mailed envelopes had a response rate of 43.5% which is within the lower expected range. The questionnaires, however, were sent also to members who were not tightly connected to the institute of natural conception regulation (INER) anymore explaining in part the limited return rate. This was compensated by the completeness and useful evaluability of the questionnaires. In addition, there was a large part of voluntary comments given in 58% of the answered mail, predominantly by women.

There is seemingly a difference between the report of authentic living of STM (83%) and the use of artificial birth control (40%) at some time of a marriage. Unfortunately, the

questionnaire did not ask at which time and how long the artificial birth control was used. Many couples used this practice (hormonal contraception, condoms, intrauterine coil) only at the beginning of the marriage when the STM was not yet known to them. So, the discrepancy between an authentic living of STM and the high frequency of using artificial birth control at some time may partially be explained.

According to the answers in this survey, the sympto-thermal method fosters the communication and facilitates dialogues on sexual issues. It increases the mutual respect between the partners and seems to bring peace to the marriage. This binds relations. Our results support an earlier publication indicating that NFP is associated with positive spousal relationships and family stability [4].

Stability of families may also be measured on the basis of the divorce rate of a sample. The overall divorce rate in this survey was 3%. The divorce rate is dependent on several factors. Primary influence can certainly be ascribed to religious belief and faith. As expected, the divorce rate was very low in the group with the religious score I (1.7%) and lowest in a subgroup of people who practice regular prayers with their partners in addition (0.6%). These observations are in complete accordance with the data of Mercedes Wilson found in 1989 [4]. However, it is of interest that the divorce rate in group III (non-optimal religious practice) still lies far below the different national values (Figure 2). For instance, the present divorce rate in Austria has reached 48% (ranging from 37% in Tyrol to almost 60% in Vienna) [5]. From this finding the question arises whether the practice of the STM per se could be a factor that contributes to the stability of marriages. The fact of an improvement of communication between the partners by living the STM after Roetzer – only 15% of the respondents have denied this aspect – supports this assumption. In addition, and this is a very interesting point, family life seems to be more happy if periodical abstinence is included into the practice of the STM and not bridged over by different artificial methods of contraception (Table 3).

Although periodical abstinence is the most frequent source of queries, a third of the voluntary comments of the responders indicates that continence has positive aspects too. In spite all argues about the difficulty of living periodical abstinence and, e.g., the problems associated with the regular watching the temperature in the morning, only 1 out of 453 women would not recommend the NFP/STM to other people.

Because of this and the fact of a very favourable Pearl Index [6], the STM which is, in addition, free of harmful side effects warrants further dissemination in the public but also a more exact description in textbooks and the syllabus of gynecologic departments.

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