Effectiveness of Marital-Skills Training

The goal of marriage-promotion efforts is not simply to increase the number of married couples, but to help couples enter into and maintain healthy marriages. Thus, an important element of the plan is to provide marriage-skills training after a couple has married to help the couple sustain and improve their relationship. Similar skills training can be provided to non-married cohabiting parents, with the goal of improving their relationship and making successful marriage more likely.

Marital-skills training has been proven effective in improving relationship satisfaction and communication. According to one authority, “Outcome research has shown that marital intervention programs have been effective in reducing distress and dissolution in couple relationships, alleviating depression, and maintaining marital satisfaction during adjustments to parenthood.” Such programs also “help women at risk for postpartum depression reduce the stress and attendant risks that may exacerbate the predisposition to such depression.”

1. The Becoming a Family Project

One of the first couple-oriented, transition-to-parenting education programs is the Becoming a Family project. In one study of this program, couples participated in 24 weekly small-group meetings from the last three months of pregnancy through the first three months of parenthood. Declines in marital satisfaction were less severe in couples that participated when compared with couples that did not participate. At 18 months after childbirth, none of the participating couples had divorced, while 12.5 percent of the control group had separated or divorced. The study also found that expectant couples were very receptive to the program and evaluated it positively.

Researchers have shown that key familial transitions that create tension in the marital relationship, such as the birth of a child, provide an ample opportunity for intervention programs.

These results suggest that this program represents a huge opportunity to improve the relationships for low-income couples at risk of separating after the birth of a child. By keeping marriages together, programs such as Becoming a Family can greatly reduce the probability that children will be thrown into poverty and welfare dependence.

2. Couple Communication

One of the oldest and best-researched skills-based training programs for married couples is Couple Communication (CC). While the program has been used in a variety of formats and settings, most research has examined the 12-hour, structured-skills training variant of the program.

Confirming an earlier meta-analysis, a 1999 meta-analysis of 16 studies found that the program yielded meaningful effects on all types of measures: Couples who took the training experienced moderate to large gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The highest effect sizes were found in studies that measured marital communication. These studies showed substantial improvements in communication among couples taking the training when compared to behavior prior to the training. Mean effect sizes in communication were 1.06 immediately after training and 0.71 at follow-up evaluations up to one year later. This means that the average couple, immediately after training, enjoyed better communication skills than 85 percent of
the couples prior to training; that percentage dropped slightly to 76 percent at the time of the follow-up evaluation. Effect sizes in self-reported measures of marital satisfaction were also strong: 0.74 immediately after training and 0.45 at one year follow-up.

In studies that evaluated CC couples against control groups, the program's effects were slightly smaller but still strong. For example, participating couples showed observable improvements in communication, with effect sizes of 0.95 immediately after training and 0.69 in follow-up evaluations up to one year later. This means that, up to one year after the program ended, participating couples communicated better than 75 percent of the couples that had never participated in the program.

3. Relationship Enhancement

Another effective skills-based program for married couples is Relationship Enhancement, which teaches practical skills that enable couples to resolve current and future problems on their own. Tapping into universal needs by teaching skills that are useful for couples regardless of ethnic background or religious beliefs, Relationship Enhancement is particularly suited for African-American couples and couples in cross-cultural situations. In Giblin's 1985 meta-analysis, this program yielded by far the largest effect size—0.96—among 20 marriage programs studied. Couples who took Relationship Enhancement training were better off than 83 percent of couples that took no training whatsoever.7)

Reflecting that success, Relationship Enhancement has been found to be effective with a wide variety of clinical and other special populations in preliminary empirical studies and case reports. It has been found to be effective in improving relationships and reducing symptoms and problems with psychiatric outpatients and their families; patients in community residential rehabilitation centers; alcoholics; co-dependents; spouse batterers; depressed clients; juvenile delinquents; drug addicts in rehabilitation; and those suffering from narcissistic personality disorder.8)

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