



Cultivating healthy couple & marital relationships

A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

CHAPTER I: Introduction

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A Public Interest

A recent report, based on a national telephone survey of 1,503 Americans age 18 and older, revealed that although only 37 percent of currently or previously married persons had any kind of premarital counseling before marriage, 73 percent of unmarried respondents said that they would attend premarital education classes; of those who were currently married, 57 percent expressed an interest in attending a marriage education class (Glenn 2005). State specific surveys reveal an even higher level of interest in relationship education opportunities. (see Chapter 2).

There is mounting research evidence that trends of increasing marital and family instability are negatively impacting children, adults, families, and communities. The research is clear: healthy relationships and healthy marriages, and resulting family stability, benefit the physical, social, and emotional well-being of adults and children as well as the community. (see Chapter 2) Recognizing the importance and challenges of sustaining healthy relationships, the general public has developed a great interest in relationship and marriage education.

In an effort to support healthy and stable relationships for those who choose to marry, the federal administration has emphasized the need to promote the availability and accessibility of educational resources that strengthen relationships and families (Brotherson and Duncan 2004; also see www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage). The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has a long history of addressing marital quality in educational programs; therefore Extension is a natural partner in this current effort (Goddard and Olsen 2004). Recent CES work has focused on building a coherent system of resources and guides for best practices in this program area (e.g., Alberts et al. 2000; Futris 2006; Greder 2005). One such organized effort includes The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN). NERMEN has been involved in identifying and promoting existing CES resources as well as creating new educational resources to support the development and maintenance of healthy couple and marital relationships for diverse audiences. (See www.nermen.org for more information.)

Educators and professionals in the field are creating and striving to effectively implement quality, research-based programs that support the development and maintenance of healthy couple and marital relationships. As such, there is a clear need to ensure that these practitioners are informed of current research on this topic and the practical implications of this research for programming with diverse audiences. To support Cooperative Extension educators and partnering professionals in acquiring the knowledge needed to effectively conduct this programming, NERMEN presents this special publication, *Cultivating Healthy Couple and Marital Relationships: A Guide to Effective Programming*. This collection of papers, offer theoretically and empirically informed recommendations for developing and offering effective relationship and marriage education programs.

Chapters 2 through 4 establish the empirical basis for relationship and marriage enrichment programming and offer strategies for developing and evaluating these programs. In Chapter 2, authors Francesca Adler-Baeder, Karen Shirer, and Angela Bradford explain the impact of couple functioning on individual, family, and community well-being, articulate the rationale for addressing couple relationships in family life education, and describe appropriate goals and approaches for relationships/marriage education. Next, Brian Higginbotham, Katie Henderson, and Francesca Adler-Baeder describe a framework to develop and modify programs using existing research as well as techniques to evaluate existing marriage education programs. In Chapter 4, authors Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Karen Shirer follow with a presentation of principles and strategies for designing relationship and marriage education programs and common challenges that may arise while planning and implementing these programs.

The next series of chapters outlines the needs of diverse audiences and programmatic strategies for serving them. In Chapter 5, Jennifer Kerpelman reviews aspects of adolescent relationships, proposes goals and objectives of relationships and marriage education targeting youth, and offers an example of an existing youth-focused relationships education curriculum. Next, Francesca Adler-Baeder, Mallory Erickson, and Brian Higginbotham summarize the unique needs of stepcouples in marriage education, review appropriate theoretical approaches, offer specific content and learning objectives, and present ideas to consider when working with stepcouples. In Chapter 7, Linda Skogrand and Karen Shirer provide educators with an understanding about how to learn about and partner with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. They also share ideas, based on their own and existing research, about how relationship and marriage education might be different for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences.

In the final chapter, Ted Futris reviews the importance of building community collaborations, the advantages and challenges of doing so, and effective strategies for developing sustainable community collaborations that support healthy relationships and marriages.

I encourage readers to consider these papers as a whole as they establish an empirically informed foundation for marriage education that reaches diverse audiences. I also call on readers to follow the recommendations of Higginbotham, Henderson and Adler-Baeder to evaluate the efficacy of these programs in order to clarify how CES is impacting the health and stability of relationships and marriages as well as to continually enhance the quality of programs being delivered. Emerging outcome research is showing that premarital education is generally effective (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Carroll and Doherty 2003; Gardner, Giese, and Parrot 2004; Stanley et al. 2006), however many marriage enrichment programs have received little or no rigorous empirical validation (Jakubowski et al. 2004). Given its connection to university and community-based resources and expertise, CES is a clear partner in advancing this effort. I hope this resource provides a useful guide to what we know about, and effective approaches for creating programs that support, healthy couple and marital relationships.

