

Skills-Based Model of Marriage Enrichment Bill Coffin

What is specific and unique about Skills-Based approach to marriage enrichment?

Skills based marriage enrichment combines cognitive instruction and behavioral instruction. Couples learn in two stages. First, cognitive/didactic instruction is provided to introduce principles, attitudes or values. Second, behavioral change is prompted by rehearsal of new relationship building skills. A skills based program will set forth learning objectives, model desired behaviors (skill), have a couple practice the skill followed by reinforcement and feedback.

- *An example: A facilitator teaches the group "5 steps to handling conflict", and models step one with a co-facilitator. Couples then practice the modeled step with each other. The personal coach (facilitator) gives immediate reinforcement and feedback. Remaining steps are modeled and practiced. Couples go out and use/practice appropriate way of handling conflict. At next week's class, they can talk about how their new skill is working.*
- Trained facilitators guide couples through the program. Most often, skills based marriage enrichment is provided in a group setting where several couples meet each week for 2 to 3 hour sessions for at least 6 weeks. Many skills based curricula are available. A list of Marriage Education programs and curricula many be found at www.healthymarriageinfo.org.
- Factors which are most often cited as harbingers of marital failure are also the most amenable to change (Stanley, Blumberg and Markham in Liddle, 2002). Communication, conflict management, beliefs, attitudes and problem solving are issues which can be changed through skills training.
- *An example:* The Relationship Enhancement (RE) program includes ten skill sets: empathy, conflict management, expressive communication, discussion/negotiation, problem/conflict resolution, facilitation, self-change, helping others change, generalization and maintenance.
- A review of marriage enrichment literature identifies specific skills important to relationship satisfaction and lasting marriage:

Empathizing
Defining and resolving problems
Managing conflict
Negotiation
Establishing trust, intimacy and respect
Disclosing and expressive skills
Listening skills
Managing shyness skills

Companionship skills
Sexual relating skills
Assertion skills
Managing anger skills
Relating skills
Financial management skills
Learning to change
Choosing a partner skills

Strengths of Skills-based marriage enrichment

- Issues of trouble are operationalized into components which can be readily understood and become the focus of work.
- Skill building is a strengths based approach; competencies can be built; needs met.
- Facilitators do not have to be professional staff. Volunteer couples can be trained as facilitators.
- Skill based training can be adapted to fit cultural setting.
- Skill based marriage education fits many formats: intensive, weekends, sessions once a week for several weeks.
- Skills based programs use methods which accommodate various learning styles. Adults often learn best when they are active participants in the learning process and are allowed to make concrete application of knowledge through practice.
- Skills based programs have been created to fit many needs, ages and developmental stages. Premarital counseling programs, high school family life programs, adoptive and foster parent training, and couples in crises have benefited from skill based marriage enrichment.

Limitations

- Skills needed for each individual and each marriage will vary somewhat.
- Some vital marriage concepts are difficult to frame as a skill. How can virtue, sacrifice and spiritual compatibility be operationalized?
- Some couples need other types of help such as marriage counseling. One size does not fit all.
- The quality of couples' learning may depend on the facilitator's effectiveness.
- It requires patience and practice (even at home!)

Beneficial Outcomes

- Couples and individuals learn to help themselves; "Clients themselves are in charge of the use of those skills during the intervention process as well as in daily life" (Guernsey, 1984).
- Once learned, skills tend to stay with the participants. Research has shown big improvement in relationship satisfaction immediately after skills education and ongoing, though declining, satisfaction/improvement over time (Stanley, et. al., 2001; Miller et. al., 1975; Wampler et. al., 2002).
- Greater competency in relationship building and maintenance may carry over into other kinds of relationships.
- Hope is restored when individuals learn strategies to break negative cycles of conflict and redirect the way they communicate.
- Stronger, healthier, happier and more lasting marriages.

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