

My Relationship Isn't Perfect - How Can I Be a Marriage Educator?

Your personal relationship does not have to be flawless in order to teach marriage / relationship education as long as you keep it out of your classes or workshops.

Have you ever asked yourself how you can possibly teach others about healthy marriage when you are struggling in your own relationship? If you answered yes, then this tip sheet is for you. At times, your personal circumstances might seem significant enough to decline a facilitation opportunity or to prompt a decision to stop teaching marriage/relationship education (MRE) workshops altogether. This tip sheet is intended to help you think about your circumstances and to develop a self-care framework through which you can be an effective relationship education provider.

1. No one, and no relationship, is perfect.

Relationships are inherently hard and marriage educators are not intended to be experts. The purpose of a marriage educator is to facilitate dialogue, manage group dynamics and educate couples on how to use relationship skills.

If your marriage or relationship isn't what you think it should be, or if you're going through a divorce or break up, do not automatically assume you are "unqualified" to facilitate MRE. Relationships are inherently hard and marriage educators are not intended to be experts. The purpose of a marriage educator is to facilitate dialogue, manage group dynamics and educate couples on how to use relationship skills. As long as you know to keep your personal troubles out of the workshop, your personal life should not interfere with your ability to share meaningful skills with others.

2. Be self-aware.

Self-awareness is an unbiased observation of one's experience and behavior. One of the many benefits of being a facilitator is learning the valuable skills and lessons regarding sustaining healthy relationships. We also get to learn from our mistakes. If, for example, you catch yourself avoiding an important conversation with your spouse or snapping at him/her more than usual, you may need to take some time to observe what is happening. It is important to take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings and behavior in a relationship. It is equally important to keep the personal nature of your experience out of the workshop environment if your relationship is currently in conflict.

3. Set boundaries.

Relationship education can bring up sensitive issues with participants and facilitators. Workshop facilitators can set boundaries for themselves as well as the class to help manage this. For example, be prepared to refer couples to other service providers for things outside your area of expertise. MRE is not counseling, and if people are coming to you for



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help with personal issues, it is important to your own wellbeing that you get comfortable sending them elsewhere for assistance. Similarly, if you find that your own relationship issues are frequently coming up during a workshop, you may need to find another outlet such as a friend or therapist with whom to discuss these concerns.

4. You are a professional.

Even if you are an unpaid volunteer, you are serving in a professional capacity as a marriage educator. You are responsible for your own professional development. One way to develop as a marriage educator is to seek out opportunities for feedback from peers or supervisors about your performance and skills. This is especially important if you realize you are struggling with your own relationship. While it can be difficult to listen to feedback, remember that the only way to improve is to challenge yourself to be the best marriage educator you can be - and this can be done with the help of others.

5. Share lessons learned.

Don't be afraid to be genuine and share that you have experienced ups and downs in your relationship. This will actually make you more "real" to the participants in your workshop. People generally appreciate hearing how others have overcome relationship challenges. But remember that the curriculum is there to be taught, so limit the number of personal stories you share to only those that are relevant. It is also important to make sure that it is okay with your significant other to disclose this information.

6. Walk the talk.

Being able to offer your participants real-life examples

of how you have utilized the marriage education tools is a great way to develop rapport with your class. Couples will feel greater trust if they know that their marriage educator practices what they preach. Attend a couples' weekend with your spouse, or use

a communication skill or problem solving technique in your personal life to see how it works. This will give you anecdotes that you can share in your workshops, and still provide an opportunity for you to work through challenges in your own relationship.

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Knowing yourself, your strengths and your growth areas is crucial to your success as a relationship educator. Although MRE is skills-based, it has an introspective nature to it which can bring up feelings of inadequacy, mistakes and regrets. To be the best marriage educator possible, you must be willing to work through your shortcomings and develop the healthiest relationship skills you can in order to be a good role model for others.

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