

Helping Couples Heal from Upsets

When you think about helping couples heal from upsets or conflicts, you may initially think of therapy as a solution. While therapy certainly has a place for some couples, especially for those dealing with deep wounds to their relationship trust and safety, marriage/relationship education (MRE) also offers opportunities for couples to heal and grow.

All relationships have challenges and some conflicts take more time to resolve than others. But couples have conflict for different reasons. Some common reasons are poor communication an inability to resolve issues together; a lack of connection or feelings of love with a partner; and having unrealistic expectations about a partner or relationships in general. Any of these reasons may be addressed through MRE classes to some degree. However, if a couple has experienced an extreme situation or has a long history of the same issues continuing without resolution, a referral to therapy may be appropriate. Sometimes past unresolved issues are triggered in the context of the current relationship. These issues are often noticeable in the amount of emotional energy and reactivity that develops around them, which is often not reasonable for a given situation. Any of these types of situations may lead to unmanaged behavior or even couple violence, which certainly puts both partners at risk.

What is the role of the MRE facilitator in helping couples heal, given that their purpose is to educate and coach, but not to provide therapy? The MRE facilitator is in a unique position to help a couple because of the ability to assess a couple's issues



and to teach them specific skills to help overcome the relationship hurts they are experiencing. The following ideas and teaching skills may help you feel more confident about making a positive impact on a couple's ability to heal.

1. Encourage couples to practice new communication techniques. Because a healthy ability to communicate is always at the heart of a strong relationship, most participants will need to strengthen their communication and conflict management skills. To change behavior, especially if this has been an ongoing challenge, practice in a safe environment is necessary. Some participants did not grow up with good role models for healthy and effective communication. They may have seen their parents or family members being overly critical, discounting, emotionally cold, silent/passive, argumentative, or abusive with each other. In some families, there may have been little open or daily communication experienced. Healthy communication patterns have to be learned. Proactive skills, such as active listening, X-Y-Z

Statements, the “SET” model (Support, Empathy, and Truth), and successful conflict resolution, are all techniques that couples can use to slow down the process of communicating, regulate the emotional components well, keep a positive and rational perspective, and tune in to each other in a more powerful and safe way.

2. Remind spouses they cannot change or “fix” each other – only themselves. One of the most damaging motivators in relationships is selfishness. As Anais Nin once stated, “We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are.” When partners lose sight of the health of their relationship, and instead focus on their own needs/wants/desires/expectations, the relationship suffers. In healthy relationships, partners keep their own needs in check and monitor those against the needs of the relationship. They take responsibility for their part in the conflict and are honest with themselves about the impact their behavior is having on their partner. Help couples identify and understand how their own unmet expectations and selfishness can create a barrier to their relationship satisfaction.

3. Educate couples about the natural ups and downs of relationships. While the strong initial feelings of attachment that happen in courtship for most couples will usually decline over time, couples are apt to misinterpret what this decline means. MRE class is a great place to educate couples about what is normal in a relationship. You can also teach them how to continually honor and nurture the relationship through having fun together, connecting intimately through physical/sexual behavior or through intense sharing, participating in a hobby together, or going on a regular “date.” The closer a couple feels, the more likely that a strong sense of trust exists between partners. Given how relationships and marriages change over time, this

deep trust is important for helping couples weather the natural ebbs and flows and remain committed to making the relationship a healthy and satisfying place to live.

4. Talk about trust, forgiveness and commitment. Some couples may have experienced long-standing or deep wounds from which they are trying to heal. Situations like these are very stressful for couples to experience. You can teach couples about how to effectively handle stress, how to rebuild safety and trust, and how to honor each other as partners. Rebuilding trust in a relationship takes a long time and the impact of a loss of trust cannot be minimized. You can teach couples about the importance of forgiveness and commitment in working through tough issues, so they can begin to experience healing in their relationship.

MRE facilitators can provide hope for couples in distress who are hurting and who are unable to find their way safely back to each other on their own. By creating a safe environment and being a trusted resource, facilitators can help couples’ relationships grow even stronger after facing the issues that once separated them. Due to the time limitations of most MRE classes, facilitators may only see small glimpses of progress in their participants’ relationships. But they should not lose sight of the incredible seeds that are planted for couples through the skills learned in MRE.

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