

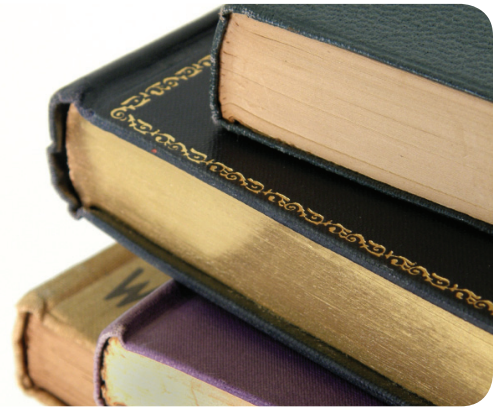
Helping Low-Literacy Marriage and Relationship Education Participants

One out of seven adults—an estimated 32 million adults in the United States—have low literacy skills. This makes it difficult for them to read anything more challenging than a children’s picture book. Low literacy is a great trial for delivering marriage and relationship education (MRE) or any other education-based prevention program. Thus, the need to appropriately adapt a program and curriculum is vital in order to effectively connect with the audience.

Literacy is more than the ability to read. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. It is important to remember that literacy and intelligence are not directly related. Individuals and couples with low literacy levels could have high intelligence levels. Because literacy is greatly valued in our society, most of the time people will not admit to low or lack of literacy skills. *Do not make any assumptions about an individual’s literacy level based on race, nationality, culture, immigration status, or economic status.* This Tip Sheet is for MRE practitioners who are delivering or considering delivering MRE services to individuals with low to no literacy ability.

Assessing Participant Literacy Levels

Assessing participants’ literacy levels should be done carefully and thoughtfully so that you can



plan your workshops. You may need to find a staff member or volunteer to assist you with certain tasks. Unless you use some form of assessment, low literacy characteristics can be mistaken for shyness or pass unnoticed. Additionally, one partner may compensate or cover for the partner with low literacy, making it difficult to detect. Watch for one partner filling out the other’s forms, etc. Observing, listening, and asking questions are vital tools to clarify your participants’ skills.

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A quick and simple way to start is to ask “get to know you” questions like you would for any icebreaker activity. In addition to basic questions such as name, family details, etc., ask what the participants enjoy doing for fun, what their hobbies are, and what their greatest memory is. This will allow you to evaluate the use of words per sentence, syllables per word, and difficulty of vocabulary. You may want to develop a simple survey for you or

your organization to use for assessment, asking the previously mentioned questions.

Listen for excuses like, “I didn’t bring my glasses,” or, “I hurt my hand” when participants are handed reading material or given forms to fill out. Adults with low literacy will often give such excuses. Another good practice is to briefly describe the three basic learning styles:

- Visual—“I learn by watching”
- Auditory—“I learn by hearing”
- Tactile—“I learn by doing”

Then ask participants to raise their hands when their learning style is called out. This can give you a quick assessment on how to modify your presentation. Individuals with low literacy will indicate auditory or tactile as their learning style. Also, see NHMRC Facilitator Toolkit Tip Sheet [Adult Learning Styles](#).

Delivering MRE

The curriculum used could be the best in the market, but if it is not tailored to the specific needs of an audience with low literacy, the impact on the individuals and couples participating will be minimal. The following tips may help you present to this population while avoiding and/or eliminating the need to read or write:

Focus on the “take home message” – For each skill or idea, ask yourself if the participant only learns one key point from each skill, what would it be? Then structure your lesson around that message.

Use simple visuals – Pictures, charts and videos can help you with your lessons. Utilize

symbols such as smiley faces to teach emotional management instead of words that are spelled out. Demonstrate concepts whenever possible. For example, show the class what positive and negative body language looks like.

Present one idea or skill at a time – Keep it simple. Use everyday language, simple sentences and short words. Instead of saying “We are going to practice our communication skills, starting with our active listening techniques” say “Let’s work on talking to each other. We will start with listening.” Break information down into smaller chunks so it is easier to understand. Always avoid jargon and slang terms. Draw on analogies that are easy and straightforward.

Repeat and review key points – Talk about key points at the end of the session. This is especially useful when classes are split into weeks or participants are coming back from breaks.

Conduct couple or group exercises – Role-playing is a good exercise as participants can demonstrate the level of understanding of the material presented and can be coached if needed. Verbally give a scenario for couples to discuss and give them the opportunity to demonstrate conflict resolution and/or problem solving skills.

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Use hands-on creative activities – Magazine pictures in a collage are great for showing what couple’s values are or what a healthy relationship looks like. Stay away from exercises that require writing or reading. If your MRE curriculum includes homework or written couple exercises

during the workshop, convert these to verbal or group exercises.

Evaluate learning often – Have participants restate and/or demonstrate key points learned. Ask questions to assess if participants understand the material presented. Constantly check your participants' facial expressions—do they look confused? Are their eyes glazed over? If so, try to restate your point, using different language or ask a participant to explain.

Dress casually – If your organization allows, dress down. Suits and ties can be especially intimidating when a learning setting itself can cause anxiety.

Read important information out loud – Information from your PowerPoint presentation, your workbook and any handouts should be read out loud.

As a word of caution, if you need to adapt or shorten a curriculum, be careful that core concepts or skills are not omitted. Work with the curriculum developer when considering any modifications. They might have suggestions on how to adapt it for the type of audience you are trying to reach.

You may need to present some material in written format (including forms, evaluation tools, etc.). It is very helpful to have other staff members or volunteers on site to help individuals fill out forms, etc.

Tips for developing materials in a low literacy format:

- Active voice (e.g., “Bill teaches the class,” rather than “The class was taught by Bill.”)
- Short words (1 or 2 syllables)
- Short sentences (8-10 words)
- Short paragraphs (60 words)
- Consistent language (do not switch back and forth between synonyms)
- A font size larger than 12 points
- Bold type in headings and subheadings
- Some blank space (whitespace) so the text doesn't overpower the page
- Full words (instead of abbreviations or contractions)

Conclusion

Many MRE curricula are backed by extensive research and are full of life-changing information. The temptation to impart all that you would like your audience to know will always be present, yet keep in mind that all of it is not necessary for getting the main point across. Know your audience and be prepared—and flexible—to further adapt curriculum once you assess literacy levels in your audience.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Enid Reyes, a trainer/facilitator in various MRE curricula with extensive experience in community outreach, for her contribution to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD and project manager, Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.

Additional Resources

[Guidelines: Writing for Adults with Limited Reading Skills](#). Gaston N, Daniels, P.

[Writing for a Changing World: Reaching Low Literacy Audience with Print Material](#). Schuster ER, McAllister DW. University of Missouri Cooperative Extension.

[Healthy Marriage and Relationship Programs: Promising Practices in Serving Low-Income and Culturally Diverse Populations](#)

[Illiteracy in America](#) (ABC)

(You Tube)