

Making Marriage Education Relevant to the African American Community

Practitioners may need to adapt curriculum materials for their audience.

Marriage education generally offers useful skills for couples. Nevertheless, practitioners may need to adapt curriculum materials to help participants learn and remember lessons. This tip sheet provides strategies for fine tuning programs toward the African American community. The tips can be applied to any curriculum, but it is important to note that marriage educators should know their audience in order to determine which strategies will create the most positive results.

Many African Americans are faced with the challenges of cultural stereotypes in their daily lives, so you certainly don't want your program to add to this; instead, the program should be a safe place for comfort and help.

Be aware of stereotypes

Remember that all patterns have exceptions and that false, sweeping statements can lead to negativity. Many African Americans are faced with the challenges of cultural stereotypes in their daily lives, so you certainly don't want your program to add to this; instead, the program should be a safe place for comfort and help.

That being said, while it's important to be careful not to stereotype, it is essential to keep in mind the common challenges that African Americans **do** face. For example, African American men, especially those in

a lower socio-economic class may experience racial profiling, under- and unemployment, connection to the criminal justice system, child support payments that are too high and early death. African American women also deal with under- and unemployment (of themselves and their partners), as well as gender role strain, access to "marriageable" men, anxiety about losing partners and children to the criminal justice system, and health problems. It may be important for facilitators to bring up some of these issues and discuss the resulting emotions. The curriculum can have couples think about any feelings of anxiety, frustration, pain, anger, etc. surrounding their own stressors and how these anxieties may affect their relationship.

Another way to tackle gender-specific stressors is to have men-only and women-only sessions during the workshop. This allows men and women to express their feelings without being in front of members of the opposite sex who may not relate. You can get them back together as a group to have a co-ed discussion about these stressors in a setting where participants may feel more comfortable knowing they are not



alone in dealing with a particular situation.

Add cultural values

African Americans have many values within their culture that are important to marriage education.

These values come from both the past and the present. They affect expectations as well as the way in which a couple relates to one another. Weaving these values and strengths into your program may help address stereotypes and struggles that many couples and families face. One source is *FORBIDDEN FRUIT: Love Stories from the Underground Railroad* by Bettie DeRamus. This book (available in video) documents the stories of slave-era couples who risked life, limb and liberty for the sake of their husbands and/or wives.

Collectivity and interconnectedness are traditions prevalent in the African American community. These values encourage people to take care of each other and share the joys and traumas of life together. These traditions can lessen loneliness when life's challenges become overwhelming. One activity to incorporate into a class is to illustrate these traditions. Ask each couple to take five minutes and list all of the members of their community (or extended family) that **they go to** for support; then list the members of the community that **come to them** for support. This

Cultural strengths include a strong commitment to children, respect for self and others, and service to others that can be illustrated in your class.

strengths-based activity can be added to a session on problem solving or coping with stress.

Other cultural strengths include a strong commitment to children, respect for self and others, and service to others. Deep spiritual connections and valuing work

are also positive characteristics that boost relationships. Look for places in your curriculum to use stories or pictures that exemplify these values and teach relationship skills.

Another class exercise to incorporate is a discussion of the historical points from West African culture that can be used in relationships. These are the "Seven R's" and are made up of: *respect, responsibility, restraint, reciprocity, reverence, reason and reconciliation*. Have couples come up with some situations where each of these can be used to strengthen their relationship.

Ask couples to talk about how family roles affect each other in a safe, one-on-one setting.

Family roles

A frank discussion about the different roles each partner performs in their relationship may be needed. As census data tells us, unemployment and high school dropout rates are higher for African American men than women. As a result, many women in romantic relationships often experience stress when they are called upon to fill the roles of both provider and nurturer. Talking about these gender issues can lead to increased awareness. For example, couples might discuss how problems in the workforce affect how they interact with each other. They might also explore whether there is truth to the notion that African American mothers "love their sons" to protect them, and "raise their daughters" to prepare them to live independently of men and if so, the extent to which this may affect their experiences and interactions as a couple. Many curricula address expectations and gender roles. To get at these particular cultural challenges, ask couples to talk about how these roles affect each other in a safe, one-on-one setting.

Understanding effects of racism on the relationships

It is important for each member of the couple to be able to express support for their partner's experiences with racism. Part of this is making sure the couples in your class or workshops are aware of how such experiences affect them individually and how, in turn, they affect their partnership. Have each person think about a time when he or she experienced some form of racism and how they reacted to it. Did he or she tell their partner about it? Did he or she hide it and then take it out on the relationship somehow? Spend time in your workshop teaching techniques for the couples to show empathy and support for each other so a supportive environment can be created.

Give information on co-parenting

Spend time in your workshop teaching techniques for the couples to show empathy and support for each other so a supportive environment can be created.

Because of lower marriage rates and higher divorce rates, many African Americans may already have children when entering into relationships and before marrying. A curriculum that is adapted for African American couples should include information regarding traditional African ideas about parenting and how to join these ideas with the reality of the needs of co-parenting today in the U.S. A class exercise can be for couples to create a list of traditional African American parenting values and apply them to co-parenting situations that couples are currently faced with in today's society.

Discuss financial issues

Today in the U.S., 24% of African Americans live in poverty. Economic strain can be a major stressor on the couple relationship. Have information on local so-

It is important to note that there is much guilt that goes along with not being able to provide for a family, and it is necessary to address this as an educator.

cial service agencies and a description of how these agencies — as well as the extended family— can play a role in helping with these stressors. Couples need to learn how to deal with the stress, frustration and anxiety surrounding this difficult situation. It is important to note that there is much guilt that goes along with not being able to provide for a family, and it is necessary to address this as an educator. Both partners must be aware of these feelings and under-

stand what these intense emotions can do to individuals and relationships.

Child support is another tough financial issue. Many African American men and women are

dealing with paying and/or collecting child support from prior relationships. The strain on a relationship surrounding paying or collecting child support from previous partners is tremendous. Coping strategies can be introduced and practiced to give couples a tool for dealing with this issue. These strategies and relationship skills can also be used when interacting with prior partners.

The role of popular culture in shaping values

Popular culture has a very powerful effect on younger couples. The use of video and audio tools can support the learning of important relationship skills for African American couples. African Americans may be torn between values of their history and those throughout current U.S. culture, such as materialism,

individualism and hyper-masculinity—themes that are common in many types of hip-hop music and videos. It might be helpful to include sessions during which couples identify messages found in popular culture and how these messages have an impact on healthy relationships and marriages. Positive verses can be found in various rap, hip hop and reggae music lyrics on the internet.

If possible, your program facilitator should be African American. If that's not possible, utilizing program staff members that share like experiences, celebrate the wisdom of African culture, and have creative speaking skills are key.

Lastly, programs for African American couples should be inspirational. If possible, your program facilitator should be African American. If that's not possible, utilizing program staff members that share like experiences, celebrate the wisdom of African culture, and have creative speaking skills are key.

Conclusion

It is important to adjust marriage education curricula to the historical and current social issues commonly faced by the African American community so that your lessons are relevant to your participants. This is done by creating an awareness of the unique issues faced by men and women of African descent in the U.S. It also means knowing how these issues show themselves in relationships, helping couples support each other, and combining relationship skills training with knowledge of the African culture. Knowing your target audience and curriculum are the first steps to tailoring your curriculum to African American couples.

Additional resources:

- **African American Relationships and Marriage (AARMS)** — Patricia Dixon <http://www.aarelationshipsinstitute.com>.
- **African American Marriage Enrichment**—Lorraine Blackman—<http://aafle.org>.
- **Black Marriage: Basic Training for Couples** —Nisa Mohammed and Rozario Slack <http://www.blackmarriage.org>.
- **African American Healthy Marriage Initiative**—<http://www.aahmi.net/>
- **Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families**—<http://www.cfwd.org>.

The NHMRC would like to thank Patricia Dixon, MBA, PhD, associate professor in African American studies at Georgia State University, for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Contributing authors also include Courtney Harrison and Sharrie McIntosh, NHMRC. This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.