National Multiple Sclerosis Society

Relationship Matters

A PROGRAM FOR COUPLES LIVING WITH MS

Relationship Enrichment for Couples Living with Multiple Sclerosis: Implications for Populations Affected by Chronic Illness

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ABSTRACT

Relationship Matters takes couples a few steps beyond general knowledge of the disease to a place where they can successfully address challenges that multiple sclerosis (MS) may bring to their relationship. Relationship Matters (RM) participants showed significant increases in relationship satisfaction and mental health quality of life at 3-months post intervention. A comparison group reported a decline or no change in the above measures, further supporting the idea that RM is contributing to these positive changes. Overall, these preliminary findings suggest that RM programs improve couple functioning and this improvement may be linked to psychological health benefits for individuals with MS and their support partners.

INTRODUCTION

• MS not only affects the individual diagnosed, but also his or her family members who often assume caregiving responsibilities and contribute to the rehabilitation process (Pakenham, 2001). Specifically, the intrusion of MS into the life of a committed couple can have significant implications for the quality of the relationship (Speziale, 1997).

• Learning how to communicate and address issues around the disease, expected and unexpected challenges, depression or financial matters are important to maintaining a healthy marital relationship and can become more difficult with a chronic illness in the picture.

• Relationship Matters: A Program for Couples Living with MS is a project of the National MS Society. The program is offered in workshops and teleclasses throughout the US based on a workshop-in-a-box curriculum developed and tested over a five-year period with grant funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families.

• The intent of relationship education and enrichment is to assist more partners in fostering and sustaining a healthy, committed relationship that they wish to continue. Applying these principles to a population that is under relationship duress due to a chronic illness is crucial.

• It is essential that proper evaluation is done on evidence based interventions with this at-risk population in order to assess measureable outcomes and effectiveness of programming for future generations. In the current study, preliminary 3-month follow-up data are explored.

"This course helped both of us understand that MS forces us to accept challenges other marriages might not contend with. Due to these challenges, we must work harder to maintain open communication to enable us to continue to respect and love one another."

- Workshop Participant

METHOD

- **Strong Empirical Approach**
  - Use of comparison group
  - Pre, post, & 3-month data assessment*
  - The curriculum synthesizes skills and techniques developed by some of the leading relationship educators and researchers in the nation. *Relationship Matters* integrates the information and resources of the National MS Society with the empirically-based marriage education program, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman & Stanley).

*Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby et al., 1995); Health-Related Quality of Life (SF-12; Ware, Kosinski & Dewey, 2000)

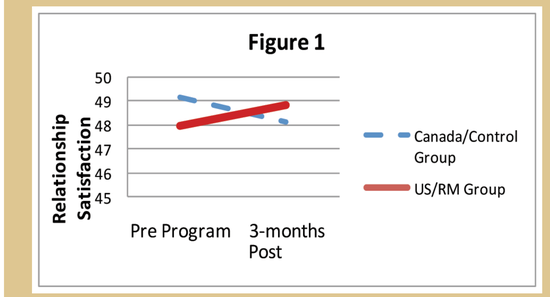
Procedure

Chapters throughout the US host in-person workshops facilitated by local providers. These facilitators use the *Relationship Matters* curriculum and adapt the activities to the needs of the specific group. The program is also available in a 6-week teleconference format facilitated by qualified group leaders. Informed consent and a minimum of 8 hours is required for program completion.

RELATIONSHIP MATTERS DEMOGRAPHICS	
Gender	57% Women
Age	M = 47.92 (SD = 11.51)
Relationship	Married 86%; 11+ years (69%)
Common Comorbidities	Depression, High Blood Pressure, Arthritis
Number of MS Symptoms	M = 8.30 (SD = 1.14)

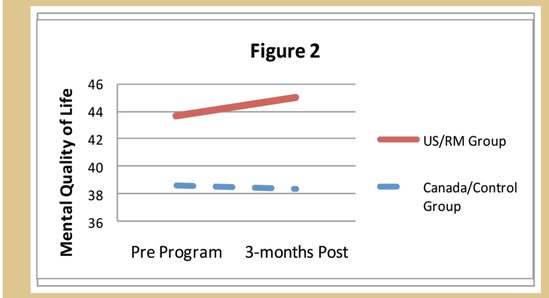
RESULTS

Main Outcome: Relationship Satisfaction



- Linear Regression was used to examine the effect of group (i.e., control or intervention) on RDAS scores at 3-months while controlling for pre-RDAS differences
- When controlling for pre scores the RM group gains on average 1.5 points in relationship satisfaction at 3-months above the control group
ß = .08, t(373) = 2.51, p < .01; R2 = .60, F(2, 373) = 277.27, p < .01
- Number of symptoms at baseline did not significantly differ between groups (p > .05)

Health Related Quality of Life



- Due to new addition of this outcome, a small sample size lead to conducting repeated measures ANOVA to examine change over time for each group
- RM participants significantly improved in mental quality of life from pre to 3-months (F (1,245) = 4.28, p < .05)
- Control group showed no significant change over a same period of time (p > .05)
- No changes in Physical Quality of Life were found for either group (p > .05)

"After 43 years, we thought we had heard it all, but this is a very good program and I feel it opened my eyes to some new ways to deal with some issues that are happening now."

- Workshop Participant

CONCLUSION

• It is vital to examine the effectiveness of relationship enrichment programs for chronically diseased populations as these individuals are at higher risk for divorce and relationship distress (Manne et al., 2006).

• In contrast to a comparison group, Relationship Matters participants are increasing in their relationship satisfaction and mental health related quality of life from pre to 3-months post programming. These improvements represent both relationship and personal gains that can have cascading long-term effects.

• Additional findings show improvements in communication, conflict resolution, ability to handle MS specific relationship issues, and use of skills learned from Relationship Matters programming at follow-ups.

• Relationship Matters is an innovative program that successfully addresses how MS impacts a couple beyond the physical.

*"We work better as a couple because of date night and actively listening to each other. We enjoyed the workshop so much, the one-on-one time and how beautiful everything was, it just really helped us so much."**

- Workshop Participant

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