**Relationship Matters**

**A PROGRAM FOR COUPLES LIVING WITH MS**

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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.

**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).**

**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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>57% Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>M = 47.92 (SD = 11.51)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Married 86%; 11+ years (69%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Comorbidities</td>
<td>Depression, High Blood Pressure, Arthritis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of MS Symptoms</td>
<td>M = 8.30 (SD = 1.14)</td>
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**RESULTS**

**Main Outcome: Relationship Satisfaction**

- Linear Regression was used to examine the effect of group (i.e., comparison intervention) on RMAS score at 3-months while controlling for pre-RMAS difference.
- When controlling for pre scores the RM group gained an average 1.5 points in relationship satisfaction at 3-months above the control group.
- d = .48, (F(1,245) = 4.28, p < .05) R2 = .08, F(1,245) = 2.54, p = .11
- There were no significant differences between groups (p = .05)

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**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.

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**Health Related Quality of Life**

*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

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**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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