

Engaging Asian Americans in Marriage/Relationship Education

Asian Americans place a high value on education but hold marital issues as a private matter.

Eleven million people, or 4.2 percent of the U.S. population, identified themselves as Asian in Census 2000. The term “Asian” refers to people having origins in the Far East, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent (including 25 ethnic groups from Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, Vietnam, etc.) and does not include Pacific Islanders. However, most marriage and relationship education programs (MRE) include Pacific Islanders because they share many common characteristics in their cultural heritage.

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Although Asian Americans represent different populations in terms of culture, language and immigration trends, they share many similarities in values and belief systems such as a cultural emphasis on education, natural healing, family harmony and respect of human dignity. For purposes of this Tip Sheet, the terms Asian and Asian American are interchangeable; include Pacific Islanders; and can reflect either new immigrants, immigrants who have been residing in the U.S. for an extended period of time, or people with Asian heritage who could be 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation. Further, the great diversity within the ethnicities of those of Asian descent is

acknowledged; however, characteristics identified within Asian communities, regardless of ethnicity, have been generalized to talk broadly about Asian American culture. It is important to assess the specific population you are working with when applying the concepts in this Tip Sheet. Finally, read the NHMRC Tip Sheet *What Marriage Educators Should Know about Working with Asian American Couples and Individuals*. This additional information may be another useful resource.

The following questions highlight issues for program administrators, managers and practitioners to consider when designing and implementing a healthy relationship initiative for the Asian community.

Does MRE appeal to Asian couples?

Asians tend to value education for themselves as well as educational programs that relate to the academic success of their families. Before attending a professional workshop, Asian Americans will more than likely want to know how it will benefit them. The key question to be answered is always: “What will be gained by the end of the program?”



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If the content of the curriculum focuses on “a problem,” or the prevention of “a problem,” those of Asian descent may not feel comfortable attending simply because they don’t want anyone to think they are having difficulties. Even though they may currently have relationship issues, they will feel too ashamed to share that with others. Additionally, in traditional Asian culture most adults believe that relationship education workshops are designed for mentally ill individuals and their families. This stereotype may prevent Asian couples from obtaining appropriate information. Instead, they would rather try time-honored methods to chase away “devil spirits” or pray that the problem will eventually just go away. Therefore, an education program must be designed as a learning program during which the participants will gain knowledge and skills.

How do I market my program?

Ensure that your program or initiative is framed in the context of an educational program. Structure the marketing of your program so that participants will not be solving or preventing marital problems, but instead be studying family dynamics as well as the health and well-being of the family. Asian couples tend to value the opportunity to consult with experts on these matters. Because of this, it is important to highlight the credentials of your program leader in marketing materials and communicate to participants that they will have a chance to discuss issues with other experts.

Emphasize the couple’s children whenever possible. Asian adults tend to welcome the opportunity to learn about their children; in contrast, they consider their own relationship problems an issue that they can handle alone. Learning the skills to create a happy and healthy family environment for children should

be stressed as one of the key outcomes of attending your program. Additionally, you may want to highlight some of the academic research linking your program to positive child outcomes. Make sure that your marketing strategy and recruitment materials reflect this information.

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Your marketing strategy should include a website for the event that links to related functions and services. Send a press release to local newspapers including those printed in Asian languages. Design a flyer with a reply slip that specifies refund policy and language(s) used in the workshop, and provide phone/email information of volunteers in a variety of Asian languages for enquiry purposes.

Do couples value MRE?

Free workshops are typically not perceived as important to the Asian community. This culture believes if something is free, it must not be very valuable. New immigrants are particularly skeptical of free workshops or services because they fear that the purpose of the workshop/service will be to sell a commodity, or get their financial or political support. Therefore, even if the government or a non-profit organization sponsors the program, it is important for the organizer to charge a small fee and make admission fee waivers or scholarships available for potential participants. In addition, to promote educational programs, it is essential to prepare a certificate as a symbolic award for the participants.

Not only will they appreciate receiving academic “credit” but it also implies that their participation is not problem-related.

What is the best workshop format?

In a public gathering, Asians usually observe their cultural rules/norms by not speaking or asking questions, because challenging authority can be perceived as impolite. As a result, they remain silent and maintain minimal direct eye-contact to show respect. Having small group discussions or providing after-workshop personal greeting time for the participants is considered culturally appropriate.

Very seldom do Asian American couples see marriage education as a group matter, not even in a religious setting. Therefore, programs may wish to provide private, confidential and individualized time during the workshop or directly after. When it comes to mental health, many Asian Americans prefer consulting with health care professionals because they believe that these professionals will provide them with a private consultation. With this in mind, if participants are encouraged to meet with the speakers at a later time; they will be less likely to initiate contact since (in their minds) it becomes a matter of “seeking help,” not providing consultation.

Who should I enlist to help with my workshops?

Multidisciplinary collaboration is an essential component to any Asian MRE program or initiative. Invite professionals from health care, mental health and academia to speak about issues that are of concern to the community.

Multidisciplinary collaboration is an essential component to any Asian MRE program or initiative. Invite professionals from health care, mental health and academia to speak about issues that are of concern to the community. For example, experts can address topics such as successful parenting,

raising American-born children, and Eastern traditions to attract Asian American participants. Whenever possible, your workshop facilitators should have advanced degrees. Find co-sponsors from universities and health care settings, including university extension programs. At the very least, hold your workshop series in one of these settings.

Asian Americans represent many ethnicities. Central to all of these are typical themes regarding privacy of marital issues and a high value placed on education. As such, the following should be provided when delivering marriage education to the Asian community:

- 1) consultation with academics and experts on family topics during workshops
- 2) individual, private access to the facilitator or expert during workshops, and
- 3) a multidisciplinary approach to marriage education.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Dr. Monit Cheung, Ph.D., LCSW, for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Dr. Cheung is an advisory council member of Asian American Family Services and Professor at the Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston. She is also a clinical social worker specializing in child and family counseling, principal investigator of the Child Welfare Education Project, and associate director of the Child and Family Center for Innovative Research. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D. and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.