

## Delivering MRE to Distressed Couples

In the past few years, marriage/relationship education (MRE) facilitators began finding the following pattern to be true: even though their MRE programs were not originally designed for couples in distressed marriages, it often was exactly those couples who attended their workshops and reported making progress on their relationships. Therefore, to design workshops specifically with this population in mind seems to make sense. In one recent study, over 90% of participants who signed up for a community-based MRE program were deemed as conflicted or in extreme distress in their relationship. At any given time, at least one-fifth of all couples are experiencing some level of marital distress or discontent which could lead to relationship demise. To serve these couples well, however it is important for MRE facilitators to understand their needs.

### Understand distressed couples

Couples feel discontent in their relationships for a variety of reasons. This is a common experience from time to time, but healthier couples generally have the ability to weather these ups and downs and still feel some sense of relationship satisfaction. Couples in distress, however, differ from couples who report being in satisfied relationships in several distinct ways. Here are some common characteristics of distressed couples:

- Pervasive dissatisfaction
- Relationship or marital separations or previous divorce
- Difficulty with communication, especially when



experiencing conflict

- Some form of partner violence
- Unrealistic expectations about marriage and relationships
- Disagreements about how to handle money
- Decreased marital affection and sexual activity
- A sense of disconnection or loss of loving or intimate feelings toward their partner
- Psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse
- Decrease in quality of physical health
- Behavioral issues of the children in the relationship
- Younger age, less education and lower income issues
- Extra-marital affairs

MRE provides information about how to have a healthy and satisfying relationship, and it teaches skills that are necessary to be successful in a relationship. Some distressed couples can use relationship skills to reconnect, improve

communications, rebuild trust and enjoy each other. However, other couples may need a program focused on troubled relationships or may benefit from counseling/therapy. Examples of curricula more focused on couples experiencing distress (both faith-based and secular) include:

- *Rebuild and Restore Your Marriage* by Don Smith
- *The Third Option* by Patricia Ennis
- *Divorce Busting* by Michelle Weiner-Davis
- *Love Without Hurt Boot Camp* by Steven Stosny
- *Retrouvaille* originally by Guy and Jeannine Beland

Couples experiencing high conflict or levels of distress in their relationships are likely candidates to request marriage education as an attempt to restore some sort of balance and reduce the pain they feel. It is important that MRE facilitators not underestimate the difficulties a couple may be experiencing and that they refer couples for relationship or marriage counseling when appropriate. Providing couples with the tip sheet [“Marriage Education vs. Counseling: How Do We Know Which is Right for Us?”](#) may be helpful.

When possible, assessing for the level of health and safety in a relationship is a key to understanding how to best work with each couple. If the relationship is not a safe place for both partners (physically, mentally, and/or spiritually), then it is not healthy. Facilitators should follow the domestic violence protocol for their program if this issue is suspected or revealed. Once the safety issues are assessed and addressed, recognizing and capitalizing on a couple’s relative strengths and areas of agreement are good starting places.

## Capitalize on Couples’ Strengths

When couples are in distress, they need to learn ways to reconnect, feel close, and feel safe and secure with each other. Most couples have some level of relationship strength that can be identified and leveraged. For example, a facilitator can ask couples to think about a time in their history when they were relating well and feeling loving feelings toward each other. Whatever the strength, couples can be encouraged to think of how they have been successful before and the skills and the attitudes necessary to accomplish that success.

## Facilitate Reconnecting

Couples need to feel safe in the relationship in order to reconnect. The facilitator can help couples build trust. Trust exercises may include practicing respectful listening, effective and non-threatening communication, and negotiating a conflict and having both partners follow through with the agreed upon resolution. Trust may also be built by addressing relationship boundaries, by creating opportunities for safe and intimate connection time between partners, and by renewing relationship commitments together.

## Identify Supports

Helping couples deal constructively with their life stressors and increasing their circle of support are also of great benefit. Couples can create a list of those people and organizations involved in their support network, and make a mutually beneficial plan to contact that network, or seek out a support group or a parenting class.

Most couples can benefit from improving their ability to communicate effectively with each other, listen more closely, physically and emotionally connect more frequently, and feel confident in their

relationship commitment. When couples want help, they will actively and consciously participate in their relationship success, but sometimes they need to build awareness and learn tools to help them accomplish their goals. MRE can give them hope and a new foundation for their lives together.

***The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center would like to thank Joyce Webb, PhD, of the Resource Center for her contribution to this Tip Sheet. 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 Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.***