

## Is It Ever Too Late for Marriage/Relationship Education?

Couples often struggle in their relationship for several years before reaching out for help.

Sometimes the couple postpones seeking help for so long that the damage seems irreparable, leading to divorce. The reasons for delaying help vary, but the devastating end result often can be avoided—if the couple is aware of and willing to practice a few simple principles and skills. An estimated 20% of all married couples are experiencing marital distress at any given time. While marriage/relationship education (MRE) is neither a silver bullet nor a method of therapy, it can be a vehicle for positive change in most couple relationships. So is it ever too late for MRE? Not if the couple is invested in having a healthy and satisfying relationship.

MRE teaches skills, attitudes and behaviors to help individuals and couples achieve long-lasting, successful marriages and intimate partner relationships. Most MRE classes are taught in a group or classroom setting or are provided through a web-based program. Many MRE curricula are clearly structured by topic or skill and have been well researched to show effective outcomes for couples. The mere act of deciding to attend an MRE program together can be a turning point for some couples.

Many couples seek MRE classes to enhance or strengthen their relationship; these couples are aware there is always room for growth. Other couples seek MRE classes because they feel hopeless or are desperate for something to change in the relationship. These couples may be in pain, unsure of their future together, and



seeking solutions they have been unable to find on their own. Such couples can present additional challenges for MRE facilitators including negative perspectives, self-righteousness, or contempt. These individuals may also express a desire for their partner to change in order for them to find happiness again. Such attitudes and behaviors, however, are counter-productive to a healthy relationship.

While each couple is unique, humans are not so different when it comes to relationship struggles. We all tend to violate similar relationship rules at times. MRE facilitators know what most people need is a safe, trusting connection with another human being who loves and respects them. When this formula is restored, a couple's relationship can begin to grow again. MRE is often the key to this restoration.

When the problems facing a couple are particularly daunting, MRE may be limited in its effectiveness. The issues below represent significant challenges and may be difficult or impossible to address solely

through MRE.

- When one spouse is using or abusing alcohol or drugs on a regular basis
- When one spouse is trying to navigate a debilitating mental illness
- When one spouse is unfaithful or not fully committed to maintaining the integrity of the relationship vows
- When one or both spouses lack maturity and the ability to emotionally regulate in times of conflict

Some of these issues are not apparent from initial visits, nor will some couples discuss these problems in a class setting. When the program structure allows for a couple assessment or a confidential interview with the facilitator, however, such issues may be revealed. After a couple gains confidence in the facilitator, the couple may reach out for assistance with how to address these challenges. When the circumstances described above exist, marriage counseling is likely the best avenue for change, even if the couple continues to find support in the facilitator and the marriage education classes. Knowing the best community counseling resources available and making timely referrals are imperative.

Both MRE and counseling share the common goal of improving the relationship. When the physical, emotional, and/or commitment safety has been compromised in a distressed relationship, more intensive intervention and healing may be needed. However, all couples who value their relationship can benefit from learning how to safely communicate, connect, and resolve issues together.

Marriage and relationship education as a field began its growth in the 1970s and has continued

to develop internationally as a respected and valued intervention for couples across various life stages. Research on many of the more than 100 known curricula shows positive outcomes for the couples who attend. By teaching couples how to communicate, resolve conflict, develop realistic expectations, have fun together, and connect deeply, couples can effectively recreate their relationship. Results consistently show that when couples want help, they will actively and consciously participate in their relationship success. MRE gives these couples newfound hope and perspective regarding their ability to build a healthy and lasting relationship together.

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