

# Personal and Professional Boundaries for Marriage Educators

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It only takes one visit to many marriage education classes to hear couples sing the praises of the program. Oftentimes, they're engaged by the ability of the marriage educators to teach a compelling and healing message. But the boundary between the marriage educator and the participant has to remain clear in order for the program to be effective.

If you are teaching marriage education classes, boundaries can be your best friends. Because a boundary by definition is a limit, it can help you maintain clarity, make good decisions, and keep you and everyone you serve safe. Here are some boundaries for you to consider in order to be an effective marriage educator.

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*Note:* The term "marriage educator" is anyone who delivers marriage or relationship education, this may be a workshop leader, facilitator, teacher, trained professional or lay leader. Similarly, the term "classroom" is used to refer to a workshop, event, session or place where marriage/relationship education is presented

## Personal boundaries:

- ✓ **Personal integrity.** The best boundary you can set for yourself is to gain clarity about who you

are and what you bring to the classroom. Marriage educators do not need to be licensed, nor do they need to be therapists, but they need to be professional. Educators should be role models about how to have healthy relationships. As such, it is important to behave respectfully and to wear clothing that will not present a distraction. It is a good idea to never work with a participant of the opposite sex in a room alone. Instead, work closely with a co-educator for accountability. Limit touching participants to a handshake or a pat on the back. Be clear about your role with participants as well as being clear about your limits to act effectively as a marriage educator. Always understand what boundaries are appropriate for home visits. It is best not to be alone with a member of the couple in a closed room so meet in common areas.

- ✓ **Professional space.** Keep your work confined to the classroom as much as possible, depending on the protocol for your program. This keeps your role clearly defined and prevents gray areas.



Therefore, most social engagements or visits to participants' homes would be considered boundary violations unless your program protocol specifies situations where this is safe to do. Check with colleagues periodically as boundary violations always set up invitations to work outside of your prescribed role.

- ✓ **Limit personal disclosure.** Another sticky issue in marriage education is when and how to share personal information with participants. You may want to think carefully about this before entering a classroom, especially if you are married. Decide what is appropriate to be shared based on the value it would add to the participants' experience, not the value it would add to your life or self-worth if it were told. Personal information is only valuable if it brings added benefit and positive role modeling to participants. The classroom isn't a place to shine, share your marital or relationship problems, or try to get participants to like you or want to help you. Remember, it's not about you!

If you already have a personal relationship, talk with the participant to see if they are comfortable with you teaching or if they would prefer to attend a different class.

- ✓ **Maintain relationship integrity.** Remember your role with each participant. If you already have a personal relationship, talk with the participant to see if they are comfortable with you teaching or if they would prefer to attend a different class. Some participants may see limited growth if they are concerned about disclosing relationship issues to you in class. Your role in the classroom is marriage educator, not friend or counselor.

## Professional Boundaries:

- ✓ **Confidentiality.** Confidentiality is probably the number one rule for any classroom and any marriage educator to follow. Because structure breeds safety in a healthy relationship, establish classroom rules from the start of class that help establish the tone and guidelines for participation. As they say, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." Participants must agree to maintain confidentiality and safety for their fellow participants. Do not forget that unless a participant gives you permission to discuss their issues in their absence, you are not at liberty to discuss anything specific with their peers or with other professionals. Avoid negative conversations with a participant about an absent spouse. Be sure to keep all documentation of class attendance and participation in a secure place such as a locked file cabinet.
- ✓ **Triangulation.** Triangulation can occur when a marriage educator visits with one spouse at a time. A facilitator has difficulty controlling this but it helps to set the following ground rule within the class: if a participant would like to share a personal story with the class, it is better to share it if the spouse is physically there in the class.
- ✓ **Eligibility.** Your program should set parameters for eligibility before recruiting so you are clear about the population you will be serving (unmarried couples, single parents, married couples, etc.) These parameters allow for clear advertising as well as help you answer any questions about why you are not serving others who are outside of your targeted population. Also be clear

with participants about the content of the program and any guidelines they will be asked to follow prior to their consent to participate.

- ✓ **Curriculum integrity.** Most marriage education curricula have a copyright and are written specifically to communicate a message in a certain way. Being effectively trained to follow the curriculum closely helps keep you on task and maintains the integrity of the program. The breadth of relationship issues we deal with today can be overwhelming. But typically, marriage education class is not a place where delving into 'hot topics' is necessary or recommended unless it is included in the curriculum. Some topics to avoid include: birth control, abortion, religion (if federally funded), homosexuality, infidelity, substance abuse and any other topic not specifically included in the course. Staying clear of these issues can help keep your focus and help protect your participants from any unnecessary discussion.

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- ✓ **Education, not therapy.** It is important to remember that marriage education is not therapy. It is about delivering a message, that when used well, can help transform a person's relationship. It is incredibly easy to grow intimately close with participants as you learn about their lives, their children, their pains, and their victories. But while you are showing compassion and empathy, remember where your job ends and their job begins. You are not a counselor. Even if you are a licensed professional, in this capacity your job

is to impart skills, not do couple-specific problem solving. Keep a list of respected professionals available for referrals when needed and make referrals in a timely manner to get your participants the additional assistance they need.

- ✓ **Safety.** To insure the safety of your clients, it is very important to have an understanding of abuse issues and domestic violence and have a relationship with trained professionals in your community for referrals. Many programs have a domestic violence protocol in place to follow that include instructions on how a marriage educator should work with exposed domestic violence issues. (See the NHMRC website for a domestic violence blueprint.) Consider other protocols for addressing risk issues such as child abuse or substance abuse to ensure the safety of participants and their family members.

## Conclusion

It is very important for marriage educators to establish personal boundaries with the members of their class. An educator should always be aware of his or her role within and outside of the classroom. Confidentiality, maintaining curriculum integrity, and understanding the parameters of your program's curriculum and eligibility requirements can help set limits. Boundaries protect both the marriage educator and program participant.

***The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center would like to thank Joyce Webb, Ph.D., for her contribution to this Tip Sheet. Dr. Webb is a psychologist with 18 years experience working with couples.***

***This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.***