

Training Marriage Education Practitioners

Proper training of your program's marriage educators is vital for success.

Marriage educators are the face of your marriage and relationship education program. Proper training is critical to your program's success. These individuals must have the knowledge and skills to appropriately respond to questions about the curriculum, identify unhealthy (and potentially violent) relationships, set boundaries, and effectively facilitate and/or present information. This is no small task, and training should be an on-going priority for quality MRE programs.

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- **Policies/procedures** – Cover the basics. Make sure your educators understand the general program procedures, their roles and

responsibilities and any protocols that may be in place. Train your educators on the technical aspects of conducting workshops and how to troubleshoot when equipment is not functioning properly.

- **Connecting with your audience** – It is important for your educators to understand the target audience your program serves. This will help them connect with and adjust the presentation to fit the needs of the audience.
- **Special issues** – Special attention should be given to cultural values, beliefs, customs and the language used by the audience. Trainings on a specific topic or issues are best left to the experts, whether they are part of your organization or are a third party. For example, you may want to identify experts in the community to train your workshop leaders on topics like domestic violence, substance abuse and special populations such as refugees and military families.



Curriculum trainings

Marriage educators should feel confident about what they are teaching. Trainings may vary from 1-5 days in duration and can be very costly. However, there is a benefit to investing time in curriculum training. For teach-out-of-the-box (TOOB) curricula which don't require training, you may want to have an experienced trainer develop a training plan for new facilitators in your program. This will improve curriculum fidelity and standardize your program across facilitators. Encourage them to provide interesting and effective supplemental material that is appropriate for their audience.

Successful programs know that the training for marriage educators never ends. Offer additional classes or "booster sessions" for your marriage educators to stay up-to-date on their skills. These classes also teach them new ideas to keep their presentations fresh and exciting. These should be provided on a monthly or quarterly basis. Topics for ongoing training sessions might include avoiding burn-out; using ice breakers and experiential activities to teach concepts and skills; and using technology to simplify presentations.

Training strategy

You may find it helpful to use a variety of approaches to training to address your educators' various backgrounds and levels of experience. Your training approach with more experienced presenters may be different than your approach with community members or volunteers with less experience. Just as a facilitator must tailor his or her curriculum to the audience, your training strategy should be tailored to the facilitators' specific needs.

Facilitator trainings are typically delivered in a group setting. In addition to being more cost effective,

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group settings provide opportunities for participants to talk to and learn from one another. You may also consider incorporating individualized trainings to fine-tune the skills of your facilitators. Using tools such as videotaping presentations, reviewing audience evaluations, one-on-one feedback and coaching may be helpful as well.

Presentation Skills and Facilitation Skills are Distinct

Although these skills are not mutually exclusive, they are different. Presentation skills describe one's ability to provide a fun and interesting presentation that maintains the participants' attention. Train marriage educators on effective public speaking

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and how to incorporate humor and use engaging examples. Facilitation skills on the other hand, refer to one's ability to manage group dynamics and encourage participation and interaction among the participants. You should encourage your marriage educators to seek ways in which they can improve upon presentation and facilitation skills as they are

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both crucial to successful Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) programs.

It may also be beneficial to pair a facilitator with a stronger presenter so he or she can watch and begin to imitate styles. Continue providing opportunities for the facilitator to gain experience and confidence. Suggest other ways for educators to apply their skills (i.e. a public speaking club such as *Toastmasters*). Practice is the key to successful facilitation.

Addressing Issues with Marriage Educators

Even though you may provide a lot of training, you may experience challenges with some marriage educators in your program.

Observe the marriage educators and provide structured feedback. Address behaviors such as sharing inappropriate personal details, deviating significantly from the curriculum, or providing counseling (if the educator is not certified to do so). Be supportive, but remind them of program expectations. Make them aware of the consequences and that they will be enforced if needed. Not everyone is cut out for a role as a marriage educator so it may be necessary to make a more appropriate placement (hosting, coaching, recruiting, etc.). A dedicated volunteer might find his or her "fit" doing something else within the program.

One way to evaluate a marriage educator's performance is for participants to complete a confidential feedback form which includes a series of

statements such as: "the instructor gave clear explanations of the material," "the instructor related the program to real-life situations," or "the instructor answered questions clearly."

The respondents rate these statements on a five level scale that measures positive or negative responses to a statement (commonly known as a Likert Scale). This feedback can help you identify trends in a marriage educator's performance.

Some marriage educators might be "naturals." Others may need a bit more assistance. Either way, training is important for every link in a program's chain in order to deliver top notch services. For the best outcomes, tailor your training to your facilitators' individual needs.

Additional Resources

These and further resources can be found at: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/about/resources.cfm>

NHMRC Tip Sheet: Personal and Professional Boundaries for Marriage Educators

NHMRC Tip Sheet: Managing a Disruptive Participant in Your ME Program

NHMRC Facilitator Tool Kit

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Leah Rubio and Sarah Byington of the Resource Center for their contributions to this tip sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.