

Engaging African American Men in Healthy Marriage Services

Recruiting and retaining African American men to your healthy marriage program may be difficult, but it can be done if proper strategies are in place.

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Recruiting and retaining men from any culture in a family services program or entity that has traditionally served women and children can, at best, be considered a token gesture. Admittedly, there are many emotions surrounding the topic of how to get men to do what they are “supposed to do!” Agencies designed to serve men are scarce, and professionals dedicated to understanding male issues are rare commodities. In addition, men do not tend to line up for services delivered by organizations, agencies, counselors, group therapists, marriage educators and/or ministers for family strengthening. Marriage educators tend to have many anecdotes about women dragging their male partners to workshops or classes.

Recently, initiatives have been created by the federal government to create culturally sensitive family strengthening programs. Prior to these initiatives, African Americans tended to be excluded from involvement in family strengthening activities. According to practitioners who work directly with African Americans, this pattern has left many African American men feeling unwanted, left out, misunderstood, forgotten and suspicious of social services agencies.

Practitioners often hear that African American men view social services policies as specifically designed to separate them from their children and families. This results in an alienation from

society and a sense of frustration and helplessness. Thus, it is necessary for practitioners to further understand the social context of the African American male as they encounter the task of engaging African American men in healthy marriage services.

This Tip Sheet is written by an African American healthy marriage practitioner and expert in the field; it is intended for practitioners who would like to engage African American men in their healthy marriage programs.

Healthy relationships are important within the African American culture; however, African Americans today may not have personal experience with healthy relationships. There is a great possibility that African



American men have not had the best marital role models, therefore, it is important for them to receive skills training in a manner in which this information will be received. Ways to successfully engage an African American man in a healthy marriage program are:

Establish trust.

This is your first priority when engaging African American men. It must be apparent that his family will not be jeopardized by his participation in your program. He needs to understand that you are there to strengthen his family as opposed to meeting your numbers. A practitioner must be sincere in this endeavor. Give him references to check (preferably African American references) so that your reputation can easily be confirmed.

Initiate contact.

Always have a man make the first contact with him to discuss his attendance. This action greatly increases the probability of him showing up. It would help to have a male make the follow-up calls and, if necessary, leave a voicemail on his cell phone. This first step is so critical that female facilitators should follow this plan even if she has to engage her husband to make the call. Have a male registrar or intake staff member and at least one other male in the room. This assures him that he will not be the only man there. African American men, as a rule, DO NOT desire to be the only man in the classroom. Having other men present shows him that you want him there, too.

Ask him what he wants to be called.

Many facilitators take too much liberty in this category. Often it is assumed that African American men do not want to be addressed by a title (Mr., Rev., Dr.). However, if he prefers a title, and you do not use it, you lose! He may never say anything about it, but it

may be difficult to get him to return. Though this may appear trite or petty to some, it is a huge turn off for an African American man.

Utilize positive peer pressure.

Proper utilization of the other men in the room can produce great results. Since men love to compete, you can use other men who participate as a positive model of engagement.

Offer praise.

“Thank you” and other courtesies go a long way. Just as he does not want to be the only man present, he probably does not want to be the only one who does not get recognition.

Intermingle activities in your teaching.

As great as you may be as a teacher/facilitator, know that he is not there for you. Have him do something to impress his wife. Ask questions that will get him some “cool points” with his wife. By utilizing other teaching styles rather than strictly the lecture style, you will engage him. Try to use all three learning styles— seeing, hearing and doing—in your class or workshop.

Pass his testing.

He may try to challenge your knowledge, assertion, information, teaching style and so forth. Much of the time, it is a test to see if he is really welcome in the class. Just know that you are being tested to see what you are made of. Allow him to test you; refuse to take it personally, and you will pass. It may sound strange but this is mostly in fun. Part of African American culture is testing another person to see if s/he is tough enough to handle herself or himself. If you see this exchange as disrespectful and become hypersensitive, then you lose.

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Additional Resources

- NHMRC Making Curriculum Appropriate for African American Couples Tip Sheet
- African American Relationships and Marriage (AARMS) — Patricia Dixon <http://www.aarelationshipsinstitute.com>.
- African American Marriage Enrichment — Lorraine Blackman — <http://aafle.org>.
- Black Marriage: Basic Training for Couples: Nisa Mohammed and Rozario Slack <http://www.blackmarriage.org>.
- African American Healthy Marriage Initiative — <http://www.aahmi.net/>

- Exploring Relationships and Marriage With Fragile Families — <http://www.cfwd.org>.

The NHMRC would like to thank Rozario Slack, DMin., for his contribution to this Tip Sheet. Rev. Slack is a marriage educator in the African American community and is the co-author of a relationship education curriculum written to appeal to an African American audience (www.rozarioslack.com).

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.