

**The Effect of the Relationship Enhancement Program among Korean Immigrant  
Couples**

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## **Introduction**

Most couples with marriage problems never try to seek therapy and get advice. Between 80% and 90% of divorcing couples report that they have not consulted with a therapist for their marital problems (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). In other words, practitioners and therapists do not have an opportunity to help and support couples who are on a trajectory toward divorce, fighting, and other negative outcomes during their marriages. Markman and Halford (2005) found that most couples do not consider going to a therapist when they are getting married, even if they already are manifesting patterns that will ultimately undermine their happiness and stability (Markman & Halford, 2005). However, most people in the world seek to be in a happy and healthy marriage. The desire to be in a healthy and stable marriage is pervasive across countries and cultures (Ridley & Sladeczek, 1992). For Korean immigrant couple, a stable and healthy marriage is important because it encourages their relationships and marriage (Min, 2001). Nevertheless most Koreans are not familiar with Marriage Education program. In Korea, it is not widespread and not easy to find these programs. A satisfying and stable marriage is an advantage not only to partners but also to their children. It is believed that children who grow up in a healthy and happy marriage tend to do better in life. To support a healthy marriage, we need to develop and use marriage education programs.

Marriage education has diverse programs and settings according to age groups such as youth and adults, and ethnic groups, for example, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, and marital status such as married, premarital, or remarrying couples. Marriage education also covers various topics. It focuses on establishing personal, couple, and family goals, raising children, sharing household duties, discussing couple and family problems,

managing finances, maintaining affection, romance, and sexual intimacy, and strengthening friendship. It gives us the tools to make our marriages stronger and relationships, healthier and give us the knowledge, information, attitudes, and skills that are important to forming and sustaining a healthy marriage in the family. Furthermore, marriage education is geared to helping and supporting individuals and couples to become aware of their needs, to learn how to express those needs constructively, to learn how to have successful relationships, to become more compassionate and empathic toward their partner's needs, and to become more willing to work to resolve and find solutions to the inevitable differences that occur in intimate relationships. Marriage education programs need educators or providers, who are a diverse group of community-based, independent organizations, and religious groups. Through marriage education, couples can build better marriages through training and developing resources. It is also based on the idea that all married couples will encounter predictable challenges and problems, and that people can be ready for difficult problems or prepare themselves for these situations by taking an educational program that emphasizes skill building (<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/marriageedu>).

There are also several good reasons to promote marriage education before couples become distressed. First, it is an advantage for couples with no or mild distress to enhance and develop their marriage (Van Widenfelt et al., 1997). Second, most couples experiencing problems do not seek professional help because they have some bias about treatment. They might think that therapists cannot treat them, it will be expensive, and it will violate their privacy. For these several reasons, few couples seek professional help for marital distress (Glenn et al., 2002). Marriage education is less likely to provide negative impacts because it is less stigmatizing, less risky, less intrusive in a couple's private life, and less expensive compared with marital therapy. In addition, some forms of marriage

education may be successfully acquired from lay leaders or clergy members (e.g., Stanley et al., 2001). Finally, education may help reduce barriers to receiving more intense professional help later.

It is believed that marriage is important in the world. The meaning of marriage is not different among cultures and societies. However, the marriage problems and dissatisfactions are a little different in each culture. In this paper, I will focus on Korean immigrants because more and more Korean immigrants are growing up in the United States. I will discuss whether Korean immigrants have marriage problems, and what are their most common issues or difficulties. Moreover, I will apply a marriage education program, Relationship Enhancement, to Korean immigrants because it helps Korean immigrant couples to understand each other, build interpersonal skills, and resolve conflicts and problems. I will review several literatures that focus on RE programs.

## **Korean Immigrant Couples**

### **Korean couples and marriage**

In Korea, the marriage between a man and woman represents the joining of two families, rather than the joining of two individuals. There are several types of marriages in Korea. Arranged marriage is popular in South Korea. Generally, parents arrange a meeting. The reason why this type of marriage is prevalent in Korea is that marriage in Korea is not just a matter of a bride and groom but a merging of two families. Although arranged marriages are still popular in rural areas, an increasing number of educated and urban Koreans choose their own mates. Love marriage has become common in the past 20 years. The expression refers to the marriage of two people who are in love with each other. Most

often, the bride and groom first met on a blind date arranged by friends or relatives, on a group date, at their workplace, or while in college or university. South Korean families are more open today to this type of marriage than they used to be. Matchmakers are used for half of the weddings in Korea. Families will go to a matchmaker and present their young adult with their resumes, and ask him or her to find someone who is compatible in status and earning potential. Koreans keep precise lineage records and these would be listed on the resume.

In accordance with increasing urbanization and industrialization, the extended family is no longer a domestic unit. The predominant form of household unit, especially in the cities, is the nuclear family, although a transitional form of stem family is also common. Social changes such as alternatives to traditional marriage, the declining stigma attached to divorce, and the rising standard for happiness in marriage have occurred in Korea. Women's growing independence, the product of feminism and employment outside home, has significantly contributed to a continued rise in the divorce rate (Cho, 1988).

### **The unique aspects of Korean immigrants' couple**

Koreans are recent immigrants to the United States. The majority of Korean immigrants are first-generation people who arrived after the mid-1960s. The number of Korean immigrants has increased over tenfold in the past few decades, from 70,000 in 1970 to 1,076,872 in 2000 (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). Most Korean immigrants came to the United States around the 1970s in order to gain better economic, occupational, and educational opportunities for themselves and their children. For instance, education is the principal step to entering the upper social class in Korea society and it forces Koreans to go abroad and study English and become fluent. Therefore, Korean parents have sacrificed

themselves for their children and are willing to move several times if necessary for the sake of improving their children's education. Thus, the better educational opportunity for their children is one of the main reasons for Korean immigration (Lee, 2005).

Although some studies view immigration as an opportunity and challenge for exploration and personal growth, it is true that immigration is a stressful and traumatic process for immigrants readjusting to a new culture, and occupational and economic stresses (Short & Johnson, 1997). It includes leaving their family, relatives, friends and homeland for a new life in a new society and country in which they must learn a new language, adjust to a new environment, customs, culture, and secure employment (Shuval, 1982). Upon arrival in the United States, Korean families are faced with stressful and tense experiences due to behaviors, cultures, and norms that are quite different from those of home. Many Korean immigrants also suffer from a loss of social support systems, social status and language barrier, and confront unemployment or underemployment, racism and discrimination, inability to adjust to the mainstream culture, the consequences of their children's education, family stresses, and a generation gap between parents and children causing different levels of adjustment (Ahn, 2006).

In traditional Korea, the husband is the leader of the family and is viewed as superior than the wife. Due to his role of the family, he rules with unquestioned authority at home. On the other hand, the wife is viewed as a housekeeper and childcare provider. Wives are required to be a mother who has the primary responsibility in child care and household tasks. The wife is expected to be obedient and belongs to the husband (Park & Cho, 1995). Because of the Confucian ideology, the Korean family value system has established a clear role differentiation between the husband and wife, and this principle has helped to establish an extreme structure of patriarchy (Lim, 1997). Koreans have sustained a strict division of

labor based on gender. Although Westernization has led to changes in the traditional family structure, especially gender role, they have not significantly modified the traditional marital role discrepancy between gender role behavior and attitudes (Min, 1995). Korean immigrant wives not only work outside but also continue to perform such household tasks as grocery shopping, housekeeping, and caring for children, while husbands stick to the traditional patriarchal authority, not ready to increase their share of housework (Lim, 1997). After wives increase their economic control, men are confused with their roles and economic power in the family. As a result, many Korean immigrant couples experience a high level of conflict in their marital relations (Min, 2001).

The tensions between Korean men and women begin when Korean men do not recognize the different gender roles in the United States. Korean immigrant women used to be governed by men. However, upon coming to the United States, Korean immigrant wives, who carried the traditional role as housewives in Korea, enter the labor market and their roles are emphasized more than before. Working full-time outside the home, most Korean immigrant wives are becoming financially more influential, sharing economic responsibility with their husbands (Rhee, 1996). Thus, Korean immigrant wives are aware of their contribution to the family economy and family life. As wives recognize that they share the traditional male activity, breadwinning with husbands, they think there should be a transformation in their husbands' family work. Korean immigrant wives expect their husbands to help with housework (Lim, 1997). But their husbands, who are familiar with the Confucian society, are not ready to give up their culturally prescribed authority and undertake housework chores. Most husbands think that they are the only leading person in their families, and they still adhere to their traditional Korean family system, in which males are valued and expected to govern the family. This situation creates tensions between

husbands and wives in marital relations and communications (Min, 2001).

It is true for other culture that gender role reversal causes family violence and divorce because it can easily destroy the husband's self-esteem and ego. For example, the wife's long hours of paid work and her great contribution to the family economy increase the likelihood of marital conflict about the division of housework. Her new role puts pressure on her husband to spend more time on housework (Rubin, 1983). Role reversal can create more serious problems in Korean immigrant families than in any other countries' because Korean men adhere to authoritarian and male-dominating values. They have more difficulties accepting their economic incompetence, lower power than their wives, and their wives' increased voices (Min, 2001).

Despite economic, demographic, and social changes that have taken place in Korea in the past few decades, these traditional values remain in Korean immigrant families in the Unites States. Moreover, the Korean communities are associated with Korean immigrants such as religious, social, educational, and recreational aspects. For Korean immigrants, community is one of the important factors. It can be identified that a Korean immigrant community is rooted in a great loyalty to common values, a unique traditional culture, and social network (Kim, 1991). It forces Korean immigrant women to accept the submissive role of housewives, and husbands have the crucial authority and rule over all matters inside the family (Rhee, 1997).

### **Relationship Enhancement (RE)**

#### **Aspects of RE program**

Relationship Enhancement (RE) is a marital and family therapy with a psychological educational approach that emphasizes a skill-based program rather than symptom reduction

(Accordino & Guerney, 2001). RE has helped people strengthen intimate relationships while maintaining the quality of those relationships over time. The main goals of RE are to help couples become aware of themselves and their partners, explore their partners' feelings and thoughts, encourage empathy and intimacy, and develop effective and appropriate communication and problem-solving skills. Relationship Enhancement is to train people in the specific skills they need to create satisfying, close and stable relationships and to help people identify and resolve causes and problems of family stress and discord. It emphasizes teaching couples how to self-disclose with a pattern of communication that includes feeling states, behaviors associated with these feelings, and elimination of statements that blame others for relationship concerns. The second major communication skills component (listening skills) emphasizes making reflective listening responses to the speaker that indicate an understanding and acceptance of the speaker's self-disclosure statements and the speaker's main problem and distress. The rationale is that this speaking and listening style encourages the speaker and listener to more fully explore their feelings, behaviors, and thoughts with less concern for rejection and disapproval, and developed as a source to help couples communicate better with one another (Ridley & Sladeczek, 1992).

The Relationship Enhancement program is unique in several ways. First, it can be used with distressed or nondistressed couples. Second, it is adaptable and can take forms in various formats such as weekend or multi-week sessions. Last, RE can be used in counseling with not only couples but also individuals, families, and groups. This program also was developed for use by a variety of target populations such as premarital couples, marital couples, mothers and daughters, and fathers and sons (Ridley & Sladeczek, 1992).

The integral parts of RE therapy consist of teaching nine structured skills through

coaching, modeling, and positive reinforcement: empathic, expressive, discussion/negotiation, problem/conflict resolution, facilitation (partner coaching), self-change, other change, transfer generalization, and maintenance (see Guerney, 1991). The empathic skill helps couples understand the psychological as well as the emotional needs of each other. This skill also helps the couples build trust, openness, and respect in the relationship because it not only involves more than listening and repeating what was heard but also understanding how the experiences of the speaker makes them feel in other situations. The expressive skills help the couples understand their individual needs and feelings in order to express them effectively. It is also encouraged to indicate the specific behavior desired and to provide a rationale regarding what this would mean for the relationship. The discussion and negotiation skill helps couples create an atmosphere that is positive while difficult issues and feelings are discussed. The positive atmosphere will help reveal the deep feelings on the difficult issues. To help find solutions to the issues discussed, the couples learn problem/conflict resolution. This skill helps innovative solutions to relationship problems to surface. When the couples agree on the solutions, the self-change and the other change skills are taught. These help the couples change their own behaviors and the behaviors of others for the purpose of helping their desired changes manifest. The ability to transfer and generalize helps the couples apply the learned skills to their lives. The final stage, maintenance, helps the couples sustain an effective level of skills throughout their lives. If these nine components are used, they will help the couples' self-esteem and improve their interpersonal and personal effectiveness (Bowling, Hill, & Jencius, 2005).

## **Studies on RE program**

Brock and Joanning (1983) studied how RE compared with the Minnesota Couples Communication Program (CC) with married couples. The study consisted of 46 couples in the treatment, an RE sample ( $n = 26$ ) and a CC sample ( $n = 20$ ), and 8 couples in a control group. Sixteen group leaders were trained in teaching both RE and CC before the study took place. Participants in the two experimental samples were taught the full RE and CC programs (20 hours total over 10 weeks). Results showed that participants in the RE group had significantly higher scores on their measures than did the participants in the CC training at posttest. The control group showed very little change. Specifically, RE was more effective in increasing marital communication and satisfactions.

Aradi (1985) randomly assigned 20 distressed married couples to either RE therapy or strategic therapy (ST). Couples took part in a maximum of 14 sessions. Couples in both therapies made positive results on many of the measures from pre- to posttesting. There were no significant differences between the treatments except on a self-report measure of relationship problems pertaining to family and friends. On this measure, the RE group had significantly higher scores than did the ST group.

Ross, Baker, and Guerney (1985) studied the effects of RE on married couples with severe pathology compared with the preferred therapies used by marital therapists. Five marital therapists were given a 3-day training program in RE, which was their initial exposure to the method. Following the training, new couples of each therapist were randomly assigned to receive either a RE therapy with 24 couples, or the therapists preferred and habitually used therapeutic approach with 24 couples. After 10 weeks of therapy, participants in both treatment conditions were posttested. Results showed that couples receiving the RE therapy made more positive gains in communication, general

relationship, and marital adjustment compared with those who received the therapist's own preferred treatment methods on all measures.

Greene (1986) examined the effects of RE on couples' marital communication and self-esteem. The study comprised 14 couples in the RE treatment group and 18 couples in a waiting-list comparison group. The author compared pretest with posttest results. Results showed that the RE treatment group showed higher levels of marital communication and self-esteem when compared with the control group.

Steinweg (1990) compared couples having severe marital distress and who were randomly assigned to 22 couples in RE and 24 couples in strategic therapy (ST) marital therapies for a maximum of 14 weeks. Results showed that RE couples showed more improvement in the quality of their communication. Furthermore, RE couples showed more skills in discussing both easy and difficult topics compared to the ST group. The authors stated hypotheses that ST would have higher gain scores than RE from pre- to posttest on variables including (a) relationship issues such as communication and marital happiness; (b) cohesion and adaptability; (c) real and ideal discrepancy scores for males, females, and couples; and (d) attainment of family goals. However, the hypotheses were not supported.

DeLong (1993) examined the effects of RE on different married couple types including (a) traditional-couples who hold traditional marital values, (b) independents-couples who hold less traditional values and support individual freedom as part of the marriage, (c) separates-couples who hold traditional beliefs yet support individual autonomy, and (d) mixed types-couples who share separate beliefs regarding the three aforementioned types. Forty-eight married couples participated in an abbreviated weekend RE program (11.5 hours over 2 days). Results indicated that all of the couples had increased their overall communication skill level and marital relationship after the training.

Griffen and Apostol (1993) investigated the effectiveness of RE in increasing participants' functional and basic levels of differentiation of self. The sample consisted of 20 married couples. Participants took place pretest for 6 weeks, posttest to a training group in RE skills for 15 hours over 6 weeks, and then a 12-month follow-up measured. Results revealed that, after the treatment, couples had significant increases in their functional and basic levels of differentiation of self and in the quality of their relationships compared with the control period. Significant differences were maintained at follow-up.

Cavedo (1995) studies a RE program using two types of training styles with married and cohabitating couples. The first treatment was a general coaching RE program including 18 couples, which provided them with training in RE skills using delayed feedback and reinforcement. RE trainers would wait until natural pauses occurred in the participants' interactions before offering feedback. The second treatment consisted of the specific coaching RE program including 18 couples, in which trainers provided feedback and reinforcement that was more immediate and consisted of specific modeling of techniques. Treatment in both groups lasted for 8 hours in total over 3 days. Couples in both groups were measured at baseline, posttest (within 1 week), and follow-up (within 1 week). Results showed that the specific coaching group would be better than the general coaching group. Furthermore, both treatment groups had improved scores on measures of problem solving, relationship change, and trust. However, there were no significant differences between the two groups. Surprisingly, on the variable of problem/conflict resolution comparative evaluation (i.e., comparing a current problem discussion with a previous at-home discussion of the same topic) couples in the general coaching RE group did significantly better. Results indicated that couples can assimilate and practice the RE skills with training that is briefer and less tightly coached than is usually the case.

Brooks (1997) investigated RE therapy in a small Southern town where couples who were highly distressed sought outpatient marital therapy. The RE treatment group included 22 couples and the comparison group was composed of 10 couples. The treatment group consisted of time-limited RE group therapy that lasted 2 hours a week for 12 weeks. Results indicated that couples had greater gain scores on several dependent variables during the treatment phase compared with the wait period. This was the case for variables such as trust and intimacy, quality of communication, and dyadic adjustment. These findings were noteworthy considering the brief length of treatment.

### **RE for Korean Immigrant couples**

Most Korean immigrants do not understand the emotional and psychological needs of each other because they have imminent problems to live in the United States. The current problems for Korean immigrants are financial and language problems. Without solving those problems, they cannot live a new life. Thus, Korean immigrant couples do not have enough time to communicate their emotional needs with each other. They are too much exhausted with their work and cannot listen to their spouse's opinions.

There are several strengths of RE program for Korean immigrant couples. First, RE program encourages couples to make intimate and close relationships. For Korean immigrant couples, they need to build up intimate relationships with each other. Korean immigrant people do not know how to express their feelings, empathy, and intimacy. They believe that being silent is better than exposing their feelings. Through RE program, Korean immigrant couples learn how to express and expose their deep emotional and psychological needs and interests. They can also learn the skills they need to develop and sustain these

important relationships.

Second, RE program emphasizes positive communication skills. For instance, the role of husband, they should bring some money and support their families. If he could not provide enough financial support for family, a man got disappointed and felt like a loser in the United States. In this case, he must talk with his wife because they are family and his wife can support him in some way. Without an effective conversation with their spouse, they cannot make a perfect family as well as good parents. Through communication, Korean immigrant couples understand and accept their spouse's main problem and distress. They can learn to better appreciate their spouse.

Finally, the Korean immigrant couples learn problem or conflict resolution through RE program. RE program works with couples and maintains that improving the skills couples have for handling conflicts will greatly reduce the levels of marital distress and divorce. Furthermore, its constructive handling of disagreements can prevent distress and couples can change their communication behavior and take control of their conflicts, instead of having their conflicts control them. For Korean immigrant couples, they are growing up in a Confucian society in that their behavior and characteristics follow Confucian ideology, in particular in the roles played by the husband and wife. Most of problem for Korean immigrant couples came from different cultural systems including change the role of the husband and the wife, the principle or value system in the United States. By participating in the RE program, Korean immigrant couples will have a better chance in resolving their stresses and tensions. They also achieve personal and interpersonal satisfaction.

However, there are some limitations. According to previous research, RE focused on group couples instead of individual sessions. Korean immigrant couples may prefer

individual education programs to group programs because they do not want to share their problems. They might feel that it is too personal to open their conversation in a group session.

I want to suggest some aspects to make RE program more effective. For Korean immigrant couples, it is not easy for them expose their feelings and needs because of their culture. Thus, educators need to figure out how they encourage Korean immigrant couples to talk about their problems without hesitation. The educators should emphasize how much they need to learn RE skills. Having learned about RE, Korean immigrant couples are in a better position to find more satisfaction and create more stability in their lives. As a result, it is possible that they can deal with their own problems. RE has been found to be effective with a wide variety of populations in previous studies. However, there are rare cases which are related with Korean immigrants and RE program. Thus, it is necessary to expand the research areas for more various populations.

### **Conclusion**

Through the literature review, we found that RE can be an effective and positive marital intervention in helping couples, families, and other populations attain better communication and relationships. Marriage education programs are crucial for married couples who have marital problems. These are to teach couples and individuals the knowledge, skills, and principles that are associated with satisfying, supportive, and stable healthy marriages. In addition, marriage education programs seek to decrease risk for future marital distress and conflict and to prevent problems from developing. Reducing marital distress also can reduce the risk for a variety of problems in life that are associated with

marital distress, including child and adult mental health, substance abuse, and behavioral problems.

Although there have been several studies about RE programs, the number of studies is not enough. Many studies are not about how marriage education programs impact on couples with different ethnicity. Especially, Korean immigrants have various problems to settle down in a new country because the culture and society between Korea and the United States are totally different and the gender role between husbands and wives are great challenges in married couples. Using the RE skills will allow both individuals to share concerns, solve problems, and process what are usually volatile situations. With respect to future research, RE programs would be desirable to test the longevity of effects among Korean immigrants.

Furthermore, marital conflict has been associated with high levels of aggression in parent-child relationships (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984), insecure parent-child attachment relationships (Howes & Markman, 1989), cold and angry parental behavior (Gottman & Katz, 1989), and parental rejection (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas & Wierson, 1990). It has been argued that a husband and a wife, caught up in coercive or avoidant styles of marital conflict, may lack the motivation, skills, or confidence to forge close or harmonious relationships with their children. They may fail to adequately monitor or discipline their children (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). According to Jenkins (1992), children from distressed marriages are more likely to develop a hostile and aggressive relationship with at least one of their siblings or their friends than were children in happier families. With respect to future research, we need to explore the relationship between marital conflict and parent-child relations. For Korean immigrants, they emphasize their children's educational success and they consider their children's life

seriously. They put their offspring's life into their baskets. Thus, the married couple relationship will affect their children's emotional, social and academic achievement.

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