# SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

## COLLEGE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

## Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Healthy Marriages, Relationships and Families Project

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## Promising Practices for Relationship Education Programs Literature Summary

- Factors that are dynamic, changeable and have a causal relationship in the development of couple distress and divorce/termination should be the target of marital and relationship education programs (Stanley and Markman, 1997).
    - Factors that can be changed are call *dynamic factors*. Ex: Communication Skills
    - *Static Factors* – Factors not amenable to change. Ex: Family of origin, ethnicity
- Marital and relationship education programs should seek to raise protective factors and reduce risk factors (Stanley and Markman, 1997).
    - Protective Factors are skills, attitudes, behaviors and environmental factors that add to the chances that a couple will do quite well over time. Ex: Friendship in the relationship, mutual dedication, etc.
    - Risk Factors are factors that reduce the chances of a relationships doing well over time. Ex: negative interaction patterns, dysfunctional relationship beliefs, poor affect management, withdrawal during problem conversations, etc
- Program should be *evidence-based*: research findings should inform the topics, the content, the process and the methodology. Program should be critically assessed to ensure that it is not based on outdated or non-empirical information (Stanley and Markman, 1997).
- Research supported topics for relationship education include both positive and negative factors, these include: (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2004):
    - Protective factors associated with relationships:
        - Positive emotions, affect and feeling
        - Affectionate behaviors
        - Supportive behaviors
        - Time together
        - Relational identity
        - Expressivity and self-disclosure

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        - Realistic beliefs and perception of expectations for relationships
        - Knowledge and understanding of each other
        - Consensus
        - Perceived equity and fairness
        - Positive attributions and biases about each other.

    - Risk factors associated with relationships:
        - Negative affect, emotions and feelings
        - Overt negative behaviors
        - Withdrawing, non-responsive, or dismissive behaviors
        - A demand-withdraw pattern

- Components of a relationship education program should include: (Halford, Markman, Kline and Stanley, 2003)

    - Assessment of the strengths and risk factors of the couple

    - High-risk couples should be encouraged to attend relationship education

    - Assess for and educate about relationship aggression.

    - Offer relationship education at change points/ developmental transitions.

    - Promote early reporting and intervention of relationship problems.

    - Match content to couples with special needs

    - Enhance accessibility to evidence-based relationship education programs.

    - Encourage each member of the couple dyad to do his or her own part, exert self-regulation to have a great relationship.

    - Two key suggestions, based on research, for couples to take personal action -
        - Avoid fighting destructively and to talk without fighting about important issues; and,
        - To protect and preserve a lasting love through nurturing positive connections and being committed to one another.

- Content in marriage education programs should include such factors as communication, conflict management, and discussion about core beliefs such as religious faith and commitment (Stanley and Markman, 1997).

- To attract couples to programs: Focus on key access points where windows of opportunity exist, e.g., transition times in life (Stanley and Markman, 1997).

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- Programs should seek to include some attention to creating long-term support options such as follow up procedures and refresher courses (Stanley and Markman, 1997).

- Relationship education programs must address the unique challenges of diverse populations and low-income families (Jakubowski, et al., 2004).

- Cultural competence and sensitivity should be exercised at all times when working with couples, children, and family units (Hardy and Laszloffy, 2002).

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