

Marriage Survival Curriculum: Strengthening Communities One Couple at a Time

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Abstract

The Marriage Survival curriculum is a free, research-based, adaptable curriculum that provides faculty and educators a series of easy to implement lesson plans designed to strengthen marriages and families. Lesson topics include commitment, building strong communication, strengthening relationships, financial compatibility, blending families, and building safe and happy relationships. Retrospective pre-post evaluations were utilized in a pilot study at the end of nine separate series of classes taught in two communities in the western part of the United States. Item-level paired sample *t*-test item-level analysis yielded significant pre-post differences for both men ($n=43$) and women ($n=50$) ($p < .001$) for each item related to relationship knowledge and financial management knowledge. Qualitative analysis of open-ended program evaluation data suggests that participants learned or made changes in their relationship specifically in the areas of healthy communication and financial compatibility. The curriculum is available on-line for any Extension faculty or staff to download and use for free after completing a short survey.

Keywords

marriage, healthy relationships, Extension, marriage education

Introduction

The quality of marital relationships has far reaching impacts on health, child well-being, work, financial security, and society as a whole (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007). When we strengthen marital relationships, we strengthen families, children, and communities.

Marriage and relationship education programs have increased dramatically in recent years in an

effort to help individuals create and maintain healthy relationships (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010; Cowan and Cowan, 2014). Programs have expanded from a sparse few in the 1960s to an innumerable amount across federal, state, and private sponsorship in communities across America today (Cowan et al., 2010). Many studies have evaluated the efficacy of marriage and relationship programs, and these studies have consistently shown a moderate but significant effect on the satisfaction levels of couples with their relationships immediately following the intervention (Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006; Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008). While determining long-term impacts of marriage education programs has been challenging, some studies have found moderate-range impacts, and others have shown promising long-term impact (Baucom et al., 2006; Cobb and Sullivan, 2015; Halford et al., 2008; Howell, Krafsky, McAllister, & Collins, 2013).

Results have been consistent across diverse cultural and socioeconomic participants (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Hawkins and Erickson, 2015; Howell et al., 2013; Kruegel-Farr et al., 2013; Cobb and Sullivan, 2015). Additionally, research has found that both men and women gained healthy relationship skills from relationship education (Cobb and Sullivan, 2015; Howell et al., 2013). While numerous marriage and relationship curricula exist, many of these curricula can be cost prohibitive or require formal training to implement. Thus, there was a need to create a free curriculum that is easily accessible and implementable by Extension professionals.

Program and Purpose

The Marriage Survival curriculum was written to support University Extension faculty and educators who wanted to teach healthy relationship classes but did not have the resources or experience to do so. This peer-reviewed curriculum addresses this need through providing a series of six research-based lessons designed to strengthen marriages and families. The six lesson topics cover commitment, building strong communication, strengthening relationships, financial compatibility, blending families, and building safe and happy relationships. Each lesson includes multimedia presentations with PowerPoint slides, notes and lesson plan guides, interactive activities, and participant handouts that correspond with each PowerPoint presentation. While the lessons were designed to create a series of classes to yield the greatest benefit, it was also designed to be adaptable for faculty or educators to choose specific lessons to fit the needs of their communities. Ideas for ice breakers, games, homework assignments, and interactive date nights to supplement the class series are also included.

Method

The curriculum was piloted in two counties in a Western state. The counties held the series of classes based on interest level. In Weber County, five separate series of five lessons were taught.

Four complete series of six lessons were taught in Washington County. Lessons were taught by a combination of Extension professionals and guest educators, all of whom had a background in relationship education. All lessons were taught each session, with the exception of the blending families' lesson. (Weber County did not present this topic because of the in-depth program already provided to blended families.)

Participants were recruited through newsletters, emails, websites, flyers, and announcements at other Extension events. The classes were open to anyone who was interested in strengthening their relationship.

Classes were held for two hours on weeknights in the evening. In order to encourage attendance, all of the classes offered dinner or refreshments. Child care was also offered in one of the counties. Educational door prizes such as relationship education books, movies or games were often provided for participants as an incentive to attend and participate. A combination of participant fees (\$10 per couple for the series) and relationship grant funding through the State Marriage Commission provided funding for class costs.

Participants

A total of 93 individuals participated. Participants' mean age was 35.5 years ($SD = 14.8$). Of these, 46% were male, and 54% were female. Most were married (78%); 4.5% were single, 12% were cohabiting, and 5.5% were dating. A total of 30% indicated having divorced once, and 5.7% reported having divorced twice. Over three-quarters of participants (77%) had children; the mean number of children was 2 ($SD = 1.59$). Eighty-five percent were Caucasian, and 15% were Hispanic, Asian, and of other ethnicities/races. Participants' average household income was \$48,140 ($SD = \$34,524$). In terms of self-reported level of religiosity, 5% reported being 'not very religious;' 5%, 'a little religious;' 31%, 'somewhat;' 37%, 'very;' and 22%, 'extremely' religious.

Two main outcome variables were assessed in this program: relationship knowledge and financial management knowledge. We reasoned that knowledge precedes behavior change (Bradford, Stewart, Higginbotham, & Skogrand 2015), and that with a relatively short intervention, any potential change in knowledge would be the first important variable to examine. Participants completed a hard copy survey after the intervention. Using a posttest-then-retrospective-pretest format, participants were asked to rate their knowledge about 12 areas of relationship principles (i.e., *BEFORE* and *AFTER* the program) (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007). In contrast to a traditional pretest-posttest evaluation, retrospective pretest items are administered after the intervention; here, participants rated their perceived knowledge prior to the intervention. There is empirical evidence that pretest measures taken prior to intervention are biased; that is, participants do not know the course content beforehand, and thus

tend to produce biased pretest scores due to a lack of understanding about their perceived levels of knowledge (Drennan and Hyde, 2008). In a recent relationship education study, Bradford and colleagues (Bradford, Stewart, Pfister, & Higginbotham, 2016) compared pretest and retrospective pretest means, and found evidence of response shift bias; that is, participants rated their knowledge higher before the intervention, but lower on the retrospective post. Such findings (Bradford et al., 2016; Drennan and Hyde, 2008) show empirically that retrospective pretest measures may be relatively more accurate.

Because both the Marriage Survival intervention and the related measures are new, we examined these variables at the item level, rather than scaling them. However, we provide alpha levels on this sample ($N=93$) below to inform future research.

Relationship knowledge. Facets of relationship knowledge were measured using nine items that assessed knowledge about aspects of healthy relationship behavior. Participants responded using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*was/is poor*) to 4 (*was/is excellent*) to questions such as the participants' knowledge or understanding of "the impact of my and/or my partner's personality traits on our relationship" and "how to solve problems and reach compromise." All item statements are reported in Table 1. Cronbach's alphas for the nine items in the scale were .90 for pretest and .94 for posttest (men), and .85 for pretest and .88 for posttest (women).

Financial management knowledge. Using the same 4-point Likert scale, financial management knowledge was measured using three items that assessed knowledge about sound financial management. These questions included assessment of knowledge such as "what my any/or my partner's money personality is," "what my and my partner's financial goals are" and "how to budget together." Items are reported in Table 1. Cronbach's alphas for these items were .79 for pretest and .88 for posttest (men), and .67 for pretest and .65 for posttest (women).

Results

In most cases, data came from married or paired partners; thus, analyses were completed separately for men and women to achieve independence of data (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Results for women are reported in italics. Differences between mean retrospective pretest and posttest scores were tested using a series of paired *t*-tests. As mentioned above, we analyzed differences at the item level to allow examination of discrete facets of the program.

Item-Level Tests

Relationship knowledge. Item-level results for Relationship Knowledge are reported in Table 1. Postprogram scores were significantly higher than retrospective preprogram scores. This was true for each of the nine items for Relationship Knowledge. Further testing yielded no significant

differences ($p > .05$) by gender, age, relationship status, or race, suggesting that men and women of varying backgrounds benefitted from the program. This conclusion, however, should be interpreted cautiously given the relatively small, largely Caucasian sample.

Table 1.

Differences in Retrospective Pre and Post Scores

[Table 1 Summary: For programs in both counties a statistically significant increase in self-reported knowledge gained was found from preprogram to post-program for all questions.]

Relationship Knowledge	Retro-Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
... the impact of personality traits	2.26 (.76)	3.01 (.68)	42	-8.93***
	2.29 (.61)	3.21 (.50)	48	-11.00***
... how gender differences impact interactions	2.37 (.81)	3.16 (.75)	42	-6.45***
	2.25 (.64)	3.08 (.50)	48	-9.16***
... how to express myself using "I" statements.	1.88 (.85)	2.93 (.83)	42	-9.97***
	1.98 (.79)	3.07 (.64)	47	-9.49***
... how to use reflective listening skills.	1.81 (.76)	2.95 (.81)	42	-11.06***
	2.04 (.85)	3.10 (.75)	48	-9.01***
... how to settle disagreements in a healthy way	2.11 (.75)	2.95 (.75)	42	-8.68***
	1.96 (.80)	2.97 (.80)	48	-11.91***
... how to solve problems and reach compromise	2.19 (.79)	2.95 (.84)	42	-7.35***
	2.17 (.86)	2.99 (.84)	48	-8.02***
... signs of unhealthy and controlling behaviors	2.29 (.74)	3.21 (.68)	41	-8.89***
	2.44 (.85)	3.21 (.65)	48	-6.63***
... the importance of spending time together	2.67 (.81)	3.56 (.77)	42	-6.35***
	2.83 (.75)	3.56 (.54)	48	-7.47***
... ways to deepen a loving relationship	2.29 (.74)	3.27 (.80)	41	-9.11***
	2.40 (.84)	3.41 (.58)	48	-9.33***
Financial Management Knowledge				
... what my and/or my partner's money personality is	2.30 (1.05)	3.19 (.85)	42	-7.31***
	2.35 (.96)	3.19 (.84)	48	-6.72***
... what my and my partner's financial goals are	2.58 (.91)	3.16 (.89)	42	-5.75***
	2.23 (.90)	3.21 (.85)	48	-7.67***
... how to budget together	2.07 (.87)	3.05 (.73)	41	-8.85***
	2.17 (.84)	3.13 (.74)	47	-8.14***

Note: *** $p < .001$. All scores were significantly higher at posttest.

Financial management knowledge. Item-level results for Financial Management Knowledge are reported in Table 1, with results for women reported in italics. Again, post program scores were significantly higher than retrospective preprogram scores. This was true for each of the three items for Financial Management Knowledge. Further testing likewise yielded no significant differences by gender, age, relationship status or race. Likewise, however, further testing is merited given the relatively small, largely Caucasian sample.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Approximately 93 open-ended responses to the question, “What are the most important things you learned?” were compiled and analyzed for this study using the method suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). In addition, 92 open-ended responses to the question, “Looking back, as a result of taking this course, what changes have you seen in your relationship (or plan to make) as a result of the information you have learned?” were analyzed using the same method.

Researchers reviewed responses multiple times to get a sense of the data as a whole and then developed coding categories that were reflective of participant responses. As analysis of the data continued, topics were combined to create categories and subcategories, and researchers used common words or phrases from responses to categorize topics, such as *listen*, *financial tips*, and *gender differences*. In some cases, one response contained multiple topics and was included in more than one category. After topics were collapsed and refined and categories created, researchers reviewed the total number of responses in each category to understand the most common topics participants felt they had learned or changes they had implemented or planned on implementing (Table 2). In the end, there was such a wide range of responses that the themes were not pervasive but nonetheless indicated what was most important to many of the participants. Two categories emerged that we believe are worth noting: communication and financial compatibility. Because the majority of the responses were brief and did not provide much depth or detail, general trends are reported rather than detailed quotations.

Table 2.

Qualitative Response References to Communication, Finances, and Other

[Table 2 Summary: Qualitative data indicated that communication and finances were the most common responses regarding what participants learned and changed in their relationship.]

Survey Questions	Communication	Finances	Other
Question 1 Most Important Things Learned	55	24	58
Question 2 Changes in Relationship	47	16	50

Communication. There were 55 responses indicating that participants learned the importance of effective communication and communicating often (Table 2). Most common responses included (1) learning effective ways to communicate (e.g., “use I statements”); (2) learning to listen and be more effective listeners (e.g., “listen, repeat”); and (3) learning to understand their partner’s communication style (e.g., “how to help each other understand”).

As the result of taking the course, 47 responses reflected changes, or planned changes, in regard to their communication with each other (Table 2). Common responses included (1) more open communication (e.g., “opening up the can of worms that need discussion”); (2) talking more frequently as a couple (e.g., “time together to talk”); and (3) implementing effective communication skills (e.g., “more understanding, listen better”).

Financial compatibility. Twenty-four respondents indicated that they learned something new about finances and how finances impacted their relationship (Table 2). Participants indicated that they (1) gained new “financial insights,” (2) “better budgeting” ideas, and (3) how “budget personalities” impact money decisions. One participant shared the realization that “I need to talk about money even when I don’t want to.”

After taking the classes, 16 responses indicated that participants began, or planned to begin, making changes in their finances (Table 2). The main change indicated was that of “budgeting” and “financial planning.” As one participant shared, “We set money goals together.”

Additional results. Some responses did not fit into the two categories listed above ($n=58$), but are of interest (see Table 2). Some of the additional topics that participants learned about included understanding and appreciating differences, love languages, conflict management, qualities of a happy and healthy relationship, commitment, and the importance of accepting their partner. Other changes that participants reported ($n=50$) included spending more time together, implementing more effective conflict management skills, increased expression of love and appreciation for their partner, and having a more positive attitude toward their relationship. One participant shared, “We have become more open minded to each other’s thoughts and feelings and how to be more attentive to each other’s needs.”

Summary of Findings

Evaluation of pilot program data found that the Marriage Survival curriculum is an effective tool to strengthen relationships. The quantitative data show statistically significant increases for both men ($n=43$) and women ($n=50$) ($p < .001$) regarding relationship knowledge and financial management knowledge. Qualitative analysis also suggests that participants learned or made changes in their relationship, especially in the areas of effective communication and financial compatibility.

In addition to the two piloted counties, seven other counties within the state have implemented portions of the curriculum in their areas and have reported similar findings. The curriculum has also been shared at many national conferences and individuals in other states have expressed great interest in implementing this curriculum in their states. At this point, the curriculum has been distributed to 17 states with two states making commitments to train additional faculty. The curriculum is available on-line at www.marriagesurvival.org for any Extension faculty or staff to download and use free of charge after completing a short survey.

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