Relationship Education for Individuals

The Benefits and Challenges of Intervening Early

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The vast majority of relationship education programs available are for couples who are in healthy, committed relationships. These prevention programs have demonstrated positive short and long-term effects in terms of improved communication and the prevention of marital distress and divorce. Yet, are we reaching the most at-risk populations with these programs? And, are we providing education at the most optimal time? This chapter challenges our field to consider intervening even earlier with relationship education programs that target not only the behaviors that are important once a couple has committed to a future together, but also what happens before commitment and even before a couple is formed. People make many important relationship transitions and decisions long before they are married or committed to marriage. This chapter discusses the reasons why individually-oriented relationship education is important, especially in today's dynamic family contexts, and will detail empirically-based targets for early relationship education, such as how to choose a partner wisely, ways to recognize and exit unsafe and unhealthy relationships, training in basic communication skills, and knowing how relationships affect children. A description of Within My Reach, a new individual-oriented relationship education program, is provided along with discussion of related policy and practice issues.

Relationship Education for Individuals: The Benefits and Challenges of Intervening Early

Traditional relationship education in the United States has focused primarily on couples who have already committed to marriage and it has been effective in many important ways. As we will detail in this chapter, however, intervening earlier in relationship development, before individuals are committed or perhaps even partnered, has the potential to have an even greater impact on improving relationship quality, reducing divorce rates, and, perhaps most importantly, supporting stable unions for children to grow up in.

Traditional Relationship Education

Historically, relationship education has been nearly synonymous with marriage education. When empirically-based relationship education programs were first emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they were often delivered to premarital couples as a way to help them plan for their future marriages. Still today, the vast majority of relationship education programs are designed for and delivered to couples (Halford et al, 2003). An example of a well-tested relationship education program is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; see Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001). From the beginning, this curriculum has been based on current research about how mishandled conflict or negative interactions in marriage are tied to marital distress and divorce (e.g., Markman, 1979). Its efficacy was first tested in a university setting and it demonstrated positive preventive effects for marital quality and divorce (Markman et al, 1988). More recently, it has been demonstrated that PREP is also effective in reducing negative interactions when delivered to premarital couples by leaders in religious organizations who have been trained in the curriculum (Laurenceau et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2001) and by Army chaplains (Stanley et al., 2005). A self-administered version of a PREP-like curriculum has also shown promise, especially those who enter marriages with more risk factors, such as a parental history of divorce or relationship violence (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001). Another program that has a strong empirical basis and research support is the Australian Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement program (Couple CARE; Halford et al., 2004). (For overviews of other couple relationship education programs and related issues: Halford et al., 2003; Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Ragan et al., in press.)

Curricula such as PREP, Couple CARE, or other couple-oriented relationship education programs often target conflict management and communication skills as key components of maintaining satisfying relationships and avoiding divorce. An example communication skill is the Speaker-Listener technique that encourages active listening and turn taking in conversations or disagreements between partners (Markman et al., 2001). Couple-oriented relationship education programs might also include some form of relationship assessment to help couples recognize strengths and potential problem areas in their relationships (such as PREPARE, FOCCUS, and RELATE; Larson et al, 2002) and discussions about expectations for marriage, such as about household chores, child rearing, and religion. Some programs might also include some form of personality assessment to help identify similarities and differences between partners.

There is evidence that in the United States, dissemination of couple-oriented relationship education is on the rise. For example, since the 1960s, the percentage of marrying couples who receive premarital education doubled, with 44% of couples married in the 1990s receiving some form of relationship education before marriage, most often delivered through a religious organization (Stanley et al, 2006). There is also promising evidence that premarital education is helpful. In a random sample of individuals from Southeastern states, having had some

form of premarital education was associated with higher marital quality and lower odds of divorce (Stanley et al., 2006). In addition, meta-analyses of controlled research conducted on the efficacy or effectiveness of couple-oriented relationship education programs shows an average effect size of .80 for short-term effects (Carroll & Doherty, 2003), with effects on communication-related variables being particularly robust (Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, in press). All of this information is good news to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who are interested in improving the quality and stability of marriages. Yet some of us have begun to wonder whether we are doing enough. Are we truly reaching individuals at the optimal time for relationship education? Is there information that individuals could learn about relationships even before they are committed to marriage? Could helping individuals make wise choices about partners and relationships before commitment develops increase subsequent marital stability to an even greater degree than what we can do at the beginning of a marriage with couple-oriented relationship education?

Basic Statistics on Families in the United States

To illustrate the need for early, individual-oriented relationship education, let us first review some basic facts about the makeup of families in the United States today. The median age at first marriage has risen steadily in the recent decades, with women now marrying at around 25.3 years old and men marrying at around 27.1 years old (Fields, 2004). Similarly, the median age for women having a first child has also increased, though it is lower now than the median age for first marriage (Mathews & Hamilton, 2002). The divorce rate in the United States has leveled off in the past two to three decades, but educational disparity has continued to grow, as have gaps between Whites and African Americans; for example, around 36% of those with college degrees experience divorce while 60% of those without high school diplomas will experience divorce (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Additionally, more and more couples are now choosing to live together either instead of marriage or before marriage. Cohabitation has been on the rise for several decades (Smock, 2000). Specifically, 40-50% of women aged 20 to 44 have been in cohabiting relationships (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) and 60-75% of couples married in the past decade lived together first (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, in press).

What is striking about these figures is that individuals are having many significant intimate relationships and facing many important milestones or turning points in their romantic lives long before they are married. Many are also having children before they are married and research clearly indicates that children born into or raised in unmarried household face many more risks than those who grow up in married households (Manning & Lamb, 2003). Although the divorce rate has leveled off (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), family instability has actually continued to increase in recent decades. Fewer Americans marry today than ever before and more children are born to unmarried couples than even a decade ago (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Cherlin, 2004). With increasing numbers of cohabiting unions, children are experiencing more transitions and less stability. At least two-fifths of children will live in a cohabiting union at some point growing up (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) and these types of unions tend to be less stable and have lower levels of commitment than marriages (e.g., Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). If we only intervene after a couple has formed and especially if we wait until a couple decided to marry before offering practical relationship education, we may miss many of the most important turning points in people's romantic lives. We also may miss opportunities to improve parents' relationship stability for the good of the children involved.

Gaps in Relationship Education Services

Many have recognized that couple relationship education typically has not reached those couples who are most risk for distress and divorce (e.g., Halford et al., 2003) and that much of what is known about the effectiveness of relationship education comes from samples of couples who tend to be White and middle-class. Individuals who are African American or Latino or who have lower income-level have been poorly represented in both the research and also in dissemination efforts (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Policy changes that began in the early 2000s in federal and state governments have led to many new avenues for delivering and measuring the couple relationship education, especially to minorities and to those with lower income levels (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/). This expansion has meant that many more couples and a much more diverse set of couples are receiving relationship education. Thus, gaps in relationship education services for diverse populations are being reduced. However, the majority of these programs target couples, particularly couples who are married or for whom marriage is likely a reasonable option. With this focus on couples, gaps in services remain for individuals who are in relationships that are not "marriageable," perhaps because of violence, low levels of commitment, or poorly-matched partners. There are also very few services available to adults who are not currently in relationships, but who are interested in learning about making good choices in future relationships.

Much of the basis for couple relationship education is research on predictors of distress and divorce. Stanley (2001) recommends focusing on dynamic risk factors in prevention programs for couples, such as negative communication patterns and unrealistic expectations, because these are couple characteristics that are mutable. Static risk factors for divorce, such as premarital cohabitation history, age at marriage, number of previous sexual partners, and significant differences in values or personality, cannot be changed through couple relationship education and are thus typically (and understandably) less of a focus for couple relationship education programs. (For a more complete list of static and dynamic factors, (see Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2003.) Many of these risk factors that are static once a couple has committed to marriage are actually dynamic factors before a commitment to marriage or before two partners have formed a couple. In effect, there is a great deal of empirically-based information that individuals could learn about risks for relationship distress and divorce long before they partner with or commit to someone they intend to be with for life.

Content Areas to Target in Individual-Oriented Relationship Education

Next, we discuss several possibilities for empirically-based content for relationship education with individuals who are not married or committed to marriage. We borrow the language highlighted earlier about static and dynamic factors and focus on areas where individuals can make changes and choices in their current or future relationships. Five key topic areas are detailed below, but many others may also be appropriate and important.

Mate selection. One of the key areas of focus for individual-oriented relationship education is mate selection. Choosing a partner wisely is obviously not a relevant topic for couple-oriented relationship education, for it is a static factor by then, but for individuals, there is wealth of information available and it is a dynamic factor. A large body of research exists on how individuals choose partners for relationships and marriages and on the ways that similarity in backgrounds, personality, and values are important to being able to maintain happy and lasting relationships (e.g., Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007). Thus, one important target is to provide information on mate selection to individuals and to

help them evaluate and know what they are looking for in potential partners.

Know thyself. Relationship education can also be helpful in teaching individuals how to recognize characteristics in themselves that may make some aspects of relationships easier or more difficult. Understanding one's own personality, family background and family communication styles, as well as how previous relationship experiences, culture, and religion may affect attitudes, expectations, and behavior in relationships is another plausible topic for individual-oriented relationship education.

Relationship development. There is evidence that the ways that relationships progress are related to later marital outcomes (see the chapter by Stanley & Rhoades in this volume). Age at marriage, for example, is one of the strongest predictors of divorce, with those marrying youngest having the highest divorce rate (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Relatedly, cohabiting before marriage, especially before becoming engaged, is associated with lower marital quality later on (e.g., Rhoades et al., in press). Further, having more sexual partners before marriage also appears to be associated with higher risk for divorce (Teachman, 2003). These are examples of factors that become static and unchangeable once partners are married or committed to marriage, but at early stages of relationship development, they are mutable. Let us be clear that this research is not so straightforward that relationship education for individuals should simply advise individuals to marry late and abstain from premarital sex and cohabitation. Instead, there are many possible, sometimes complicated reasons why these factors could be related to marital outcomes and what seems most important to individual-oriented relationship education is that these research findings are shared and discussed well, so that individuals can make wise decisions for themselves about their romantic relationships going forward.

Communication. Communication and conflict management skills, such as the Speaker-Listener technique that was described earlier, are staples of couple relationship education and can also be incorporated into individual-oriented relationship education. Although some skills may work best when two partners learn them together and agree to use them, many can be useful even if only one of two partners formally learns the skill. For example, learning to listen actively and paraphrase in a heated discussion is likely to de-escalate a negative interaction, even if the other party does not know the same skills. Further, there is nothing about these skills that makes them relevant only to romantic relationships. Many individuals who are not in relationships will likely find them useful in future romantic relationships, but also in current friendships or family relationships.

Relationships and children. As mentioned earlier, many individuals now have children before they are married and the majority of children in the United States today will live with an unmarried parent sometime while they are growing up. It is very clear from research that parents' romantic relationships affect children in a multitude of ways, both negative and positive. For individuals who have children, individual-oriented relationship education can provide empirically-based information on ways that relationship choices and dynamics may influence the lives of children involved. Relationship education can also teach information about co-parenting with an ex-partner and with new partners.

Safety. One of the greatest strengths of individually-oriented relationship education is that it can provide very clear information about physical safety in intimate relationships. Research has demonstrated that there are early warning signs of physically abusive relationships (e.g., Johnson, 1995; Leone et al, 2004) and individuals taking part in relationship education could learn to recognize these red flags before they are committed or constrained in relationships and learn how best to get help, if needed. Additionally, individual-oriented relationship educa-

tion can be easily linked with domestic violence services, as will be described below in the overview of one individual-oriented relationship education curriculum: Within My Reach.

An Example Curriculum: Within My Reach

Within My Reach (Pearson, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2008; Stanley, Pearson, & Kline, 2005) is an individual-oriented relationship education curriculum that was designed in 2005 to address several of the gaps in the relationship education field described earlier. Because of the novelty of the content, the authors relied on many consultants in designing the curriculum, including practitioners, researchers, and domestic violence experts. In addition, some concepts were adapted from Marline Pearson's Love U2, a relationship education curriculum she designed for high school students (Pearson, 2004) and from PREP (Markman et al., 2001). The goals of the curriculum are to "(1) help those in viable relationships to cultivate, protect, and stabilize their unions, and to marry if desired; (2) help those in damaging relationships to leave safely; and/or (3) help those desiring a romantic relationship to choose future partners wisely" (Pearson et al., 2008; Stanley et al., 2005). Within My Reach contains approximately 15 hours of material and is designed to be delivered to groups of adult or young adult women and men. When initially constructed, the target audience for the curriculum was individuals with children who had very low income levels (see Stanley et al., 2005). Since then, the curriculum has been used with many other populations including high school and college students, prisoners, and military personnel.

The content is divided into three main sections. The first covers models of healthy relationships, mate selection, expectations and personality, and two key concepts that are relied upon throughout the curriculum: 1) relationships affect children ("our love lives aren't neutral") and 2) going slowly in relationships and making good decisions, rather than just letting things happen, are ways to lower risks in relationships ("sliding vs. deciding"). The second concept follows from research and theoretical work detailed by Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) and also described by Stanley and Rhoades in another chapter in this volume. The middle section of the curriculum provides specific information about safety in romantic relationships, how to recognize dangerous and unsafe patterns, and ways to leave relationships safely. There are clear messages about safety throughout the curriculum, but it is in this part of the curriculum that participants have the opportunity to directly access local domestic violence services, if necessary. Also in the second section, individuals learn communication skills like the speaker-listener technique and other ways to identify and manage conflict in all kinds of relationships. The last portion of the curriculum focuses on specific issues and potential problems in relationships, such as ways to manage co-parenting with ex-partners and also new partners, infidelity, and commitment.

Delivering Within My Reach is straightforward. Instructors attend a three-day training that covers background on the curriculum, the specific content, and guidelines for delivering it well. Following this training, they are ready to beginning offering the curriculum themselves. They receive a detailed instructor manual as well as electronic presentation slides and DVDs. Participants receive a workbook that contains many of the main points, as well as related exercises. There are no degree requirements for becoming trained and many successful instructors do not have previous experience with relationship education. We believe that those who tend to make the best instructors are individuals who are inherently interested and passionate about the topics and who are generally effective teachers and engaging people.

Initial research on Within My Reach. Because of the newness of the Within My Reach cur-

riculum, only one study has been conducted on its utility so far. A qualitative study was recently completed that examined the fit between the curriculum and the participants' needs and interests as well as whether participants used concepts or skills after they completed the program (Sparks, 2008). Participants in this study were individuals who were taking part in Within My Reach as part of a larger program for individuals receiving government assistance. Thus, they were mostly women who had children and whose income was below the poverty line. This investigation demonstrated a good fit between the content topics and the audience's relationship situations and concerns. Further, in a follow-up interview, all research participants reporting finding some of the content valuable and most could describe instances in which they had used the new information they learned. In particular, the Speaker-Listener technique, the concept of sliding vs. deciding, and the information they learned about themselves and their own family backgrounds seemed to have stood out to them most. A large, quantitative study of the effectiveness of Within My Reach is in the planning stages by this chapter's authors and colleague Howard Markman.

Challenges Related to Individual-Oriented Relationship Education

As is true with couple-oriented relationship education, there are several potential obstacles to disseminating relationship education to individuals. In some ways, we have better access to individuals than we have to couples, but in other ways, access is more limited. An obvious benefit of doing relationship education with individuals is that it does not require scheduling both partners for the same sessions or classes. Encouraging one individual to attend a relationship education class is likely much easier than needing two to attend. A related challenge, however, is that there is not an easy or obvious entrance point for individuals into relationship education. With couple-oriented relationship education, couples often are offered these services by the religious organization that will perform their wedding. In some cases, attending premarital education is a requirement for the wedding services. Additionally, some states now offer lower marriage license fees if a couple attends relationship education. Couple-oriented relationship education is therefore becoming part of these larger systems, making it easier for couples to access and likely reducing the stigma against such programs.

Based on dialogue and feedback from program directors and practitioners who regularly deliver individual-oriented relationship education, we can offer several concrete suggestions for increasing the reach of programs designed for individuals rather than couples. First, although we believe it is decreasing, stigma still exists against seeking out relationship "help". Thus, reducing the chances that potential participants will feel marginalized for attending such a program is important. Advertising materials and descriptions of these programs might describe them as classes or workshops and certainly not as therapy or help. Second, when other, more structural barriers to attending can be identified, practitioners can work to overcome them. Transportation, childcare, and meals are likely the top three structural barriers and they are relatively easy to overcome. Reducing these barriers reduces the burden participants may feel for attending. Can transportation be arranged or can bus passes be provided? If it is possible, providing on-site childcare can save participants money and resources while also encouraging a stronger sense of community amongst the class members. Although it is a simple gesture, providing food can also have a strong positive effect. It not only helps participants save time, energy, and money, but it, too, can encourage a strong sense of community. For those who may not have positive experiences with formal education, it also cues participants to recognize that the class or workshop being offered is not like typical academic classes.

Third, practitioners who have had good success in attracting participants to individual-oriented programs suggest allowing new participants to start a program right away. Once an individual is interested in taking part, asking them to wait until the next program begins may decrease their motivation to follow through (Jennifer Baker, personal communication, October 15, 2008). In practice, allowing new individuals into groups at any time means that the curriculum must be delivered flexibly so that it does not need to follow a particular sequence.

Finally, integrating individual-oriented relationship education into existing systems is likely the most effective way to reach potential participants. Because of stigma, barriers, and many other reasons, it is unlikely that individuals will flock to relationship education programs on their own. Once individuals take part, they are likely to be satisfied with the new knowledge and experiences they have gained, but relationship education tends to be a "hard sell". Whenever possible, practitioners and policy makers will reach the most people most cost-effectively by adding relationship education to existing programs or communities. In the United States, individual-oriented relationship education is now being offered in many states as part of programs for unemployed persons or those who are receiving government assistance. Correctional facilities and rehabilitation clinics also use individual-oriented relationship education programs as part of their regular offerings, as do some colleges and universities. Linking with domestic violence services and shelters and agencies may also provide good avenues for delivering individual-oriented relationship education. Lastly, religious organizations are natural settings for any kind of relationship education, as a sense of community and space for classes and workshop already exist.

Measuring the efficacy and effectiveness of individual-oriented relationship education is another challenge that this new field will face. Some work has examined the effectiveness of individual-oriented relationship education delivered to high school students and found promising short-term effects (e.g., Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004), but, more generally, this area will require significant new thought and creativity moving forward because of the long-term goals of relationship education delivered to individuals. Methods and measures for couple relationship education are well researched and tested, but may not apply well in this case. For example, one of the strongest positive outcomes of traditional relationship education is reduced conflict or negative interactions between partners (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Measuring reductions in negative interaction for individuals who may or may not be in relationships is much trickier. Additionally, many other constructs that have not been measured in couple relationship education must be assessed in effectiveness studies of individual relationship education. Programs like Within My Reach seek to change core beliefs about relationships and also long-term relationship formation patterns. Thus, measuring attitudes and very long-term relationship behaviors will be important.

Conclusion

There have been many advances in couple-focused relationship education in the past two decades, in terms of research as well as practice. Much of this work has set the stage for an understanding of the opportunities that exist to reach individuals with educational strategies designed to improve their odds of achieving stable marital and family relationships and lasting love. The opportunities that exist will be expanding for years to come given that it continues to be true that most people aspire to love that lasts a lifetime, while fewer people than ever before are likely to achieve this goal based on current trends.

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