

# Case Study

## The Marriage Course

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### **Nicky & Sila Lee**

**The Marriage Course, London**

As editors, we felt it important to add some colour to the book by showing what relationship education looks like on the ground. There are several excellent programmes described in this book that are well informed by research findings – PREP and its new variants Within Our/My Reach in the US, other variants of PREP in Norway, Couples Coping Enhancement Training in Switzerland, Brief Encounters® and Let’s Stick Together in the UK. Although less explicitly research-based, The Marriage Course covers some of the same ground as these programmes and is currently being evaluated. Most importantly it merits inclusion amongst these papers because it has achieved considerable popularity across the world. Marriage Courses are now running in 76 countries and have already reached 95,000 couples. The Marriage Course is comfortably the dominant programme available in the UK. Nicky & Sila Lee deserve great credit for this achievement.

**Harry Benson & Samantha Callan**

Having run a course since 1985 to help engaged couples prepare for marriage, it was apparent to us that the vast majority of them were infatuated. The atmosphere was great – as hopeful, positive and excited as you are likely to get in a group of three hundred or so people. But talk about conflict or forgiveness or working through difficulties in their sexual relationship, and you could see from the look in many of their eyes that they knew this would not apply to them. *'Conflict? We won't have conflict. We're far too much in love.'* Infatuation, scientists tell us, lasts anything from three minutes to three years. Sooner or later all of us take off those rose tinted glasses and see our partner as they are – warts, irritating habits, illogical views, ridiculous ideas and all.

So, in 1996, we started The Marriage Course, a course designed for couples to spend seven evenings together in a romantic setting, having a candle-lit meal, listening to a talk on different aspects of building a marriage and having private conversations with their partner. When we began we assumed it would be for couples in their first five years of marriage who had done our Marriage Preparation Course and wanted to invest in their future together. But on our second course we had a couple who had been married for ten years, then on the next, a couple married for fifteen years, then twenty, thirty, forty-five. (The longest marriage on the course so far has been sixty-four years.)

The feedback at the end of the course was much the same however long the couple had been together. A couple married for two years wrote, *"It provided us with the opportunity to discuss things that we would not have thought of talking about but we've found out needed to be discussed."* A couple married for three years said, *"We enjoyed the time out on Mondays to concentrate on us."* A wife married for twenty-two years: *"I very much appreciated the safety of the structure of the course, the surprising privacy amongst so many couples."* A couple married for thirty years: *"The course helped and improved our marriage by questioning areas that had gone to sleep: more conversation and communication, less TV."* The couple who had been married for sixty-four years said they giggled their way through the course. They kept nudging each other and saying, *"Do you remember when that was an issue for us twenty... thirty... forty years ago?"*

Some couples come with a great relationship, relishing the opportunity to spend these seven evenings together. Others are struggling. Some come as a last resort and the course has thrown them a lifeline and provided a way for them to re-open communication around sensitive subjects. As one couple who had been married for five years described: *"This course has helped us pull back from the brink of separation. It was a last resort. It got us talking again."*

No one is required to say why they have come and their conversations remain private. Most couples come on the course on the recommendation of friends who have already completed it. An important factor is the assurance that there is no group work, as many people have two fears about doing a course like this. One is that they will be required to disclose personal, and possibly intimate, details of their relationship to other people. The second, and often greater, fear is that their partner might have the opportunity to disclose such details to other people! We assure couples there will be neither the requirement nor the opportunity.

Separated couples, who have used the course as a way of trying to get back together, might meet outside and come in together. Sometimes it is only from the end-of-course questionnaires that we ourselves discover their situation.

One separated couple, married for nine years, described how the course helped them: *It has been invaluable in providing us with simple, practical tools to help us remember why we got married in the first place and how to work through the problems we are having. It's the simple things*

*we forgot about. We now want to resolve our problems, not brush them away. It seems that we may be able to resume our marriage, something we thought almost impossible a few months ago.*

In response to requests from people wanting to run The Marriage Course in other locations, we published it on DVD with guest manuals and a leaders' guide in 2002. The course is now being run regularly in over 3,000 locations in 76 countries. Our aim in the UK is to have enough courses running so that any couple wanting to do one can find a course near enough for them to attend.

We run the course ourselves in Central London three times a year and around a hundred couples attend each course. The setting is as significant as the talks. The room is set up with small tables for two, tablecloths, candles, a flower on each table and low lighting. Background music is played during the meal as well as during the couples' discussions to ensure their conversations cannot be overheard by anybody else. The aim is to create a relaxed, romantic atmosphere, like a restaurant, so that each couple feels that they are out on a date. During the longest discussion, which lasts at least thirty minutes, we and our team of helpers serve the couples tea, coffee and dessert.

The aim of the talks is to open up conversations around the important tools needed for a healthy, lasting relationship. The couple's discussions are the most important part of the sessions as they are putting the principles of the course into practice.

The course evolved over several years before we settled on the topics we would address. Each session builds on the previous one(s). On the first session we look at the importance of setting aside time for the marriage relationship and how to identify each other's emotional needs. On the second we address what hinders and what helps effective communication. On the third, how we tackle differences in our personalities and in our views. On Session 4 we look at the importance and power of forgiveness and how hurt and anger need to be addressed, not buried. On the fifth session, the couples look at the impact of their wider family to see what they have brought into their marriage from their past. This session also enables couples to ask whether they have separated properly from their parents and are making their own decisions. Session 6 addresses the important place of sex in marriage and what's involved in building, or re-building, a healthy, sexual relationship.

We have based Session 7 on Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages* (1995). The aim of this session is to help couples recognise the way they and their partner feel loved and how to express love most effectively to each other. Clinical psychologist Judith Wallerstein, in her book *The Good Marriage* (1996), researched the common factors among the happy marriages of fifty couples. Part of her findings bears out this need for couples to discover what is important to show love to each other:

*Individuals have their own patterns of what makes them feel better...Some people need to talk; others prefer to be left alone...Some people need to be listened to right away; others need to delay until they have begun to sort things out... What would be insulting for one person is exactly what another needs. It is essential that both partners know what strategies will help the other bear the everyday stresses of life.*

Recently we have added an optional session for couples who have to spend extended periods apart, particularly those in the armed forces. The material is based on the experiences of couples in the army, navy and airforce and is structured around research by Kathleen Vestal Logan called 'The emotional cycle of deployment'.

The content of the course is based on Christian principles for practising love in a marriage.

But the practical advice is accessible to those without any Christian faith or church background. Cohabiting couples are also encouraged to attend. Some have recognised the value of making a lifelong commitment and have felt confident to get married as a result of doing the course.

The course is long enough to allow real change as couples practise the principles of spending time together, communicating effectively, looking for solutions in areas of conflict, telling each other of any hurt they are carrying, expressing forgiveness, talking about their sexual relationship, showing appreciation of each other and so on.

Each person is given a manual. Sometimes they are asked to fill in an exercise, which then forms the basis for their discussion. This is valuable when one partner is less articulate than the other and the time taken to think while writing and then to exchange manuals allows for more mutuality in their discussion. The manual also has homework exercises so the couple can continue exploring and discussing the topic on their own between the sessions.

Couples attending the course are encouraged to seek further help if they get stuck over an issue that comes up or are unable to resolve their differences. Our experience shows that on average ten percent of the couples will ask for assistance. Of this ten percent roughly half need help to put one or more of the principles of the course into practice and that is sufficient to take them forward again. The other half will require more ongoing professional counselling. We therefore recommend that anyone starting to run The Marriage Course should have the contact details of at least one counsellor that they can make available. Meanwhile an increasing number of therapists are referring couples to The Marriage Course as a way of helping them to practise talking and relating in a constructive way without the presence of a counsellor as a third party.

We recommend running the course as a rolling programme, and at the end of each one we hold a party to which the participants can invite other couples who might be interested. At the party we give a talk on what makes a marriage grow, outlining some key topics of the course, and then three or four couples who have just completed it talk about the differences it has made in their relationship.

Our goal is to help make marriage education (both before and during marriage) available to every couple in the UK. At the moment most support is given through marriage counselling, but often by the time a couple goes for counselling it is too late. The Marriage Course seeks to empower couples to put in the foundations themselves to insure against a crisis and then to keep investing in their relationship.

Making courses a 'normal' activity is as important as making them available. And that requires a change of culture in the UK, a new way of thinking about marriage education. Hasten the day when taking the opportunity to learn the skills and attitudes to build a marriage is as normal as taking lessons to learn to drive a car or being coached to improve a golf swing.

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## References

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