

## **Marriage Education and Marriage Therapy: Which, When and How?**

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I am a psychologist in private practice whose marriage therapy treatment strategy includes a heavy dose of marriage skills training.

My own interest in marriage education began with the realization that psychotherapy is the art of helping people to resolve their conflicts. Yet most psychotherapists did not seem to have particular expertise in conflict resolution.

Because the psychotherapy literature did not offer this expertise, I turned to the literature on business negotiation. Beginning in 1982 during a five-month stay in Israel, I began writing articles and books to bring conflict resolution understandings to the world of psychotherapy, and eventually also directly to couples.

My first book on this topic was for therapists, **From Conflict to Resolution**. I then focused on conveying cooperative partnering skills directly to couples via a book entitled **The Power of Two**. That book has been published in multiple foreign language editions, including Turkish, Portuguese, Chinese, Polish and Hebrew.

Reading a book, however, did not seem sufficient for most couples to learn the skill set, so my daughter, psychologist Abigail Heitler Hirsch, Ph.D., and I added a workbook, **The Power of Two Workbook**.

For training couples in group workshop settings, we developed a **Power of Two Workshops** leaders' manual and curriculum guide. To train workshop leaders, we added a video, **The Win-Win Waltz**, in which we demonstrate techniques for leading a marriage education workshop session.

Most recently, my daughter and two of my sons, who are of the wired generation, have launched a website where couples (and therapists) can upgrade their collaborative dialogue and conflict resolution skills, <http://poweroftwomarriage.com>, via interactive learning games and multi-media presentations.

### *Why Marriage Therapy Needs Marriage Education*

In my clinical work with couples, my skills-oriented treatment strategy rests on the assumption that if people *knew* better, they would *do* better.

Backward-looking family-of-origin work strengthens people's understanding of where they learned their mistaken interaction patterns. This backward glance helps to pull emotional over-reactions and counter-productive habits of interaction up from their roots.

For improvement in these patterns, however, most couples also need explicit skill-building. A three-part combo of teaching skills, guiding couples to resolution of issues that have divided them, and exploring the family-of-origin sources of mistaken habits, promotes long-lasting change.

Psychotherapists as well as marriage educators and couples need marriage education training options because of the dearth of marital skills-training offered in most psychology graduate schools. Marriage education is a new area of knowledge that has yet to become integrated fully into therapist training programs.

#### *Marriage Education as a Stand-Alone Option*

Preparation is generally preferable to reparation, so an ideal time to offer marriage education is probably prior to marriage, in marriage preparation courses.

Comprehensive marriage education programs generally teach couples at least four key skills sets:

- *Communication skills* for collaborative talking, listening and dialogue
- *Emotional self-regulation* so that anger does not tarnish the marriage
- *Win-win conflict resolution* for cooperative shared decision-making. This skill set needs to include skills for cleaning up after upsets.
- *Positivity*, that is, habits that infuse a relationship with the kind of positive energy, affection, and sunshine that enables households to thrive.

#### *Pros and Cons of Marriage Education Work*

The appreciation of workshop participants makes this work highly gratifying. Understanding that peace at home leads to happier and emotionally healthier children, and also to peace in a society, can add even more sense of mission to the work.

The main downside of offering marriage skills workshops is the significant marketing effort necessary establish a referral flow. Until the general public understands the importance of marriage education, or until marriage education is required in order to obtain a marriage license, most couples will continue to under-rate the necessity of high-level skills for assuring a positive marriage partnership.

From the therapist or educator's perspective, marriage skills workshops can be inconvenient to offer because they generally need to be scheduled on non-work hours. Scheduling workshops on weekday evenings and/or weekends can intrude on the leader's own leisure and family time.

On the other hand, offering workshops one or two nights a week, or one weekend a month or so, can substantially boost a therapist or marriage educator's earnings.

#### *Therapy Versus Education for Couples: Which when?*

Marriage education ideally would be offered to every couple prior to marriage, with brush-up and skills-consolidation courses offered subsequently, and especially at transitions such as prior to the birth of the first child.

Mildly distressed married couples that realize that they need some marriage help often find full benefit from turning straight to marriage education courses. With better skills, they then can address their provocative and divisive issues successfully on their own.

For couples who mainly need just a skills upgrade, marriage workshops, because they usually are taught in groups, are generally a far less expensive option than therapy. In addition, the group format can be very powerful lever for change in spouses who are reluctant to admit that their behavior might be part of the marriage's problems.

Couples that have already experienced acute distress however generally need to begin getting help by obtaining marriage therapy. Highly emotional spouses, or spouses who have locked into negative attitudes toward each other, generally find it too difficult to focus on learning new skills. They need guidance first through the turbulence. Once the crisis has past, however, they then also can focus on learning the skills that will enable them to navigate more safely in future challenging waters.

In other words, marital therapy must eventually combine guidance toward resolution of the couple's divisive issues with teaching communication and conflict resolution skills.

The two modalities of marriage education and marriage therapy thus are not mutually exclusive. In fact, workshops and therapy can be utilized together. Marriage therapists may encourage their clients to attend a marriage education workshop to accelerate their treatment. And marriage educators may refer couples for therapy during or after completion of their course.

#### *The Business Side of Marriage Education*

Interestingly, in terms of income potential, leading workshops actually can yield higher per-hour income than marriage therapy. One of the clinicians in our practice recently reported that a workshop with five couples—her preferred workshop size—yields more than double what she earns per psychotherapy hour. Because her hourly earnings are greater and also because her husband will be available to do childcare during the times that she teaches workshops, her plan is to continue teaching marriage education when she takes maternity leave from her clinical practice.

As I mentioned above, however, marketing is vital for building a marriage workshops program. Marketing can be targeted to engaged couples seeking premarital

education, established couples seeking marriage enhancement, couples in therapy, as well as specific high divorce-risk groups such as empty-nesters and parents of special needs children. Marketing strategies can include flyers at ob-gyn practices, hair-dressers, gyms, and wedding dress stores, and internet or radio ads.

With regard to the business side of marriage therapy, psychotherapists with strong collaborative communication and conflict resolution skills can market their practice to divorce lawyers, who tend to be a virtually untapped referral source. Divorce lawyers can refer high conflict couples who would prefer to fix rather than abandon their marriage. They can also send recent divorcees who are having difficulty letting go of the marriage, and post-divorce couples who need to learn skills for cooperative co-parenting.

### *Learning These Skills*

A psychotherapist or marriage educator who wants to conduct marriage education groups must first become expert in emotional self-regulation, cooperative communication, clean-up of upsets and conflict resolution, and positivity skills.

Therapists sometimes design their own marriage education course materials. It may be preferable however to start with one of the many excellent existing curricula rather than to start by re-inventing the wheel. The website [www.SmartMarriages.com](http://www.SmartMarriages.com) offers an overview of the full field of marriage education, including listings of many existing marriage education curricula.

I offer multiple marriage-educator self-study resources. These include the **Power of Two** book and workbook, an audio cd called **Conflict Resolution for Couples**, a 70-minute dvd called **The Win-Win Waltz** that demos a **Power of Two Workshop**, and the online interactive learning on <http://poweroftwomarriage.com>. I also offer free articles on my website, TherapyHelp.com.

To obtain the leaders' manual for teaching **Power of Two Workshops**, please contact me via the *Contact Us* form on my TherapyHelp.com website.

The bottom line: a good marriage enhances virtually all of life's blessings—longer life, more happiness, health, wealth and enjoyment.

While communication and conflict resolution skills play a huge part in sustaining both personal well-being and healthy marriage partnerships, they also lead to happier and emotionally healthier children, and to a more cooperative and peaceful society.

Therapists and marriage educators thus can play a hugely positive role in their country by teaching couples these skills.