

What is Marriage Education?

Version: June 14, 2005

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to assist you in understanding what Marriage Education is, to explore its potential role over time, and to encourage a wide range of people and organizations to be engaged in offering some form of Marriage Education within their communities, religious groups, and globally.
- 1.2 Marriage Education is a process of teaching important knowledge, skills, and attitudes about marriage. Marriage Education is not counseling or fixing problems, but instead focuses on capacity building. In other words, its purpose is to build strengths and equip people to be successful in their roles as marriage partners. It includes providing preparation for relationships and marriage for individuals and couples, as well as marriage enrichment for already-married couples.
- 1.3 As individuals strengthen their own marriages, they will naturally engage in outreach to support the marriages of family members, friends, and the public. There is no single way to accomplish the transformation of marriages—every entity will develop its human resources and implement what works best for it. Over time, an increasing number of systematic educational programs will emerge and develop.
- 1.4 Many people have a pivotal role to play in the vital process of creating families with strong marriages at their foundation. Part of this role is incorporating both marriage preparation and marriage enrichment as integral to the life of society. A possible outcome of this effort is that couples will not dream of getting married without preparation, and married couples will naturally engage in ongoing learning that supports them throughout marriage. This education, then, is likely to reduce the rate of divorce and create happier marriages with skilled marriage partners.
- 1.5 Marriage is a foundational element for healthy and happy families. Thousands of years of religious laws and society's civil laws both support and protect it. Marriage Education affirms and recognizes the importance of having appropriate legal elements in place that allow marriage as an institution to continue and thrive.

Note: The words, “Marriage Education” are capitalized throughout this document to indicate the generality of faith-based and secular educational programs and methods that support marriages. The term does not refer to, nor endorse, any specific program.

SECTION 2: A CALL TO ACTION

- 2.1 The current problems in marriages globally, and the high rate of divorce, presents us with the opportunity to transform the institution of marriage and to bring it to a new level of maturity, vitality, and stability. For the first time in history, there is in-depth, longitudinal research on what makes marriage work, which has resulted in exciting new marriage-strengthening programs, classes, and books. Marriage educators often take these science-based efforts and pair them with secular materials and/or spiritual teachings to support the individuals, marriages, and families they serve. These efforts are bringing new hope and life to marriages.
- 2.2 Many communities are suffering from the breakup of marriages and families, and therapists and clergy/religious leaders often feel burdened with numerous counseling cases. The number of troubled marriages and families, the high number of individuals who are cohabiting, and the increase in individuals scared to marry, are cause for concern.
- 2.3 Throughout the world, there is a growing movement of people who are passionate about strengthening marriages, and many are becoming marriage educators. They are taking initiative to make a difference, becoming passionate for Marriage Education, and incorporating it into their relationships and work. They are

truly committed to communicating new relationship and marriage information to individuals and couples and focusing on encouraging a culture that is pro-marriage and family-centered. Some of these people include:

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| a. Married couples | k. Social workers |
| b. Singles | l. Clergy and religious institutions/congregations |
| c. Parents | m. Lay and family life educators |
| d. Families | n. Facilitators |
| e. Citizens | o. Teachers |
| f. Community activists | p. Government leaders and policymakers |
| g. Scholars | q. Legal professionals |
| h. Researchers | r. Workshop facilitators |
| i. Counselors | s. Authors |
| j. Therapists | |

2.4 Some elements are vital for Marriage Educators to consider as contributions to the transformation and maturation of marriage. These include:

- The importance of marriage and avoiding divorce
- The necessity of knowing a partner's character before marriage and encouraging it after marriage
- The equality of women and men
- Using couple consultation as a communication and decision-making tool
- Accepting and including diversity in marriages
- Practicing chastity, which includes trustworthiness and faithfulness, before and after marriage

SECTION 3: WHY MARRIAGE?

3.1 The work of many marriage researchers is supporting the value of the institution of marriage, something that most religions have long taught is the best foundation for families and society. Restoring love and harmony as the hallmark of marriages is a vital endeavor for the future of society. Families are nations and the world in miniature, and peaceful families contribute to a peaceful planet.

3.2 Some of the key research findings* from the social sciences about the social benefits of marriage are:

- Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers will have good relationships with their children
- Marriage supports financial stability for mothers and children and increases family wealth
- Children raised within stable, happy marriages do better in school and careers
- Family members enjoy better physical health, and men have longer life expectancies
- There is a lower rate of alcohol and substance abuse among married adults
- There is a lower rate of psychological distress and mental illness among children with low-conflict married parents
- Married adults are less likely to engage in criminal activity
- There is less domestic violence when women are married than in cohabiting or dating relationships
- There is a lower rate of child abuse when a child lives with biological, married parents

*Summarized from "Why Marriage Matters"; 2002, Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education, and the Institute for American Values

SECTION 4: CURRENT CHALLENGES REQUIRE A NEW APPROACH

4.1 Couples filled with love, romance, and the intent to marry may approach their clergy/religious leaders to seek guidance on marriage preparation and to officiate their weddings. These couples often have limited knowledge and skills to sustain their marriages, and clergy/religious leaders may be uncertain about what to offer them. Marriage educators can assist them in preparing materials or courses that provide the couples with needed guidance, or clergy/religious leaders can train to become marriage educators themselves.

- 4.2 Marriage preparation ideally should begin in homes and communities long before a couple begins courting and discussing the possibility of becoming engaged. It is valuable at any stage, however. Family unity is vitally important, and couples will benefit by ensuring their parents know both of them well and are in support of the marriage.
- 4.3 Couples who are already married, and struggling with complex issues, may also approach clergy/religious leaders for support and guidance. This can often be a daunting and time-consuming challenge for them or their assistants, especially when the couples is influenced by a culture that often encourages divorce and discourages commitment. The spiritual fallout from divorce can be very challenging for the individuals, families, and communities, and clergy/religious leaders may struggle to maintain the unity and functioning of those they serve.
- 4.4 It is disturbingly common to hear people in society comment that divorce is almost inevitable, while at the same time, couples dream of being the exception. The failure rate for marriages in some countries is very high, and it increases for re-marriages. With apparently poor odds of success, it is not surprising that many couples decide to live together, to delay marriage, and “try it out” first instead. Research is beginning to question whether this practice is actually helpful in supporting couples with establishing a long-term relationships or marriages.
- 4.5 Marriage Education is a hopeful new approach based on decades of marriage research and clinical practice. The research is clear: creating and sustaining marriages correlates strongly to how much a couple knows about how to make marriage work well, how good their skills are in sustaining their relationships, and their ability to practice what they learn. Couples can *learn* how to maintain a happy marriage.

SECTION 5: WHO ARE MARRIAGE EDUCATORS?

- 5.1 Marriage educators are people who are passionate about making a difference for individual marriages and creating a culture that supports marriage as a whole. Sometimes they are professional counselors, but this is not a requirement.
- 5.2 Marriage research shows that others can teach Marriage Education as well as—or better—than mental health professionals. You do not need a mental health degree or license to become a qualified Marriage and Family Education instructor. Diane Sollee, executive director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education (CMFCE) says, “Just as we don’t need heart surgeons to teach smoking cessation or diet and exercise classes, we don’t need a therapist to teach couples the best practices and perspectives for making their marriage or relationship successful.” Of course, this does not in any way discount the value that therapists offer to troubled couples, who deal with many issues that marriage educators are not trained to handle.
- 5.3 Marriage educators may meet with couples for assessment and coaching sessions, or they may teach or facilitate more formal workshops or courses with groups of individuals or couples. Facilitators usually have attendees practice targeted skills, such as communication, conflict resolution, or effective listening. Sessions can be adapted for different groups, cultural demographics, and needs.
- 5.4 Marriage Educators go through training so they can offer classes based on research and/or religious texts. Many instructor-training courses are one to four days in length. Most Marriage Educators then engage in an ongoing process of learning from various books, courses, and conferences. There are regularly updated options at the CMFCE website, www.smartmarriages.com, or you can search the Internet for other resources. CMFCE also offers an annual Smart Marriages Conference, which provides extensive opportunities for Marriage Education training.

SECTION 6: MARRIAGE EDUCATION STRATEGIES

- 6.1 Marriage Education, again, is the process of assisting people to gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support them in marriages. Generally, it is not about dealing with the pathology of relationships in trouble; rather it is about building marital health and wellbeing. Some marriage educators may have or add professional training, however, that gives them the ability to offer specialized assistance to couples who are facing such issues as alcohol/drug dependency, infidelity, extreme anger, domestic violence, and more. Marriage educators

have an ongoing and vital role in assessing the needs of each couple and then taking appropriate actions to encourage strong marriages in the community.

- 6.2 Commitment to this vital matter may involve providing high-quality marriage preparation programs that assist couples to know one another's character and families and to ensure they know how to work in partnership to create happy and lasting marriages. It may also include having ongoing enrichment sessions for all marriages that support their sustainability, not just professional remedial counseling and actions for marriages that are in trouble, although this is also needed.
- 6.3 Marriage Education utilizes a number of different methods, although the primary one is workshops or classes. The following paragraphs detail some of the options.
- 6.4 Marriage educators can arrange effective **workshops and classes** for people in their communities so they can participate in preparing for marriage or engage in marriage enrichment. These courses provide knowledge and skills for successful marriages. This method also can provide valuable encouragement and training opportunities to support individual initiative, as people who attend sessions can often develop an interest in being trained to be marriage educators as well.
- 6.5 Marriage educators can offer couples the opportunity to use a **relationship inventory or assessment tool**. These provide a structured report for discussion and coaching the couple through issues. It can also point to specific areas where a couple could benefit from knowledge-building or skill training.
- 6.6 Religious congregations or other organizations can establish **couples' mentoring programs**, where married couples work with engaged or newlywed couples for a few months, guiding them through a thorough discussion of marriage and helping them practice skills together.
- 6.7 Unmarried individuals and couples can gather to study relationships and marriage together either as an informal group or along with a facilitator. Married couples could also gather for ongoing **study and enrichment sessions**. These can often be fun and supportive experiences, especially as they are educational and not meant to be group therapy sessions.
- 6.8 Many marriage educators have developed and are continuing to develop Marriage Education **books and materials**. While some are strictly secular and some are religiously-based, many combine both scientific research on marriage and spiritual teachings. Marriage educators can explore and determine what works best for their situations. If there are specific interests or needs, an existing Marriage Education program may be willing to adapt or develop its materials for a community or the population a marriage educator serves.
- 6.9 There are many sources of training or information. As previously mentioned, www.smartmarriages.com lists a wide array of marriage education resources.
- 6.10 It is important to remember that Marriage Education is a fairly new endeavor globally, and it will take many efforts and initiatives, as well as careful evaluation of each, to determine what works best for each circumstance.

SECTION 7: WHAT DO COUPLES NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MARRIAGE?

- 7.1 Marriage educators may provide some or all of the following vital knowledge and skills that support successful marriages:
 - Communicating effectively
 - Developing and utilizing consultation skills for decision-making
 - Understanding expectations
 - Resolving differences harmoniously
 - Knowing one another's character
 - Building a foundation of friendship
 - Committing to marriage
 - Expressing love effectively
 - Establishing spiritual practices
 - Creating family unity
 - Being effective parents/stepparents
 - Becoming equal partners
 - Discussing sex and intimacy
 - Managing money issues
 - Setting up and maintaining a household

- Managing time and service commitments
- Handling challenges and difficulties
- Having a positive attitude and using encouragement
- And many more...

SECTION 8: HELP AT ANY RELATIONSHIP STAGE

- 8.1 Although each marriage has unique challenges, researchers are beginning to identify some transitions when extra understanding and skills are helpful. Each change brings a different set of stresses that can disrupt the balance between couples and cause them to question their relationship. Couples can get help from relationship coaching and Marriage Education programs at any stage, regardless of how long the relationship has existed or its circumstances. The transition points that may need extra attention include:
- Pre-Marriage (Self-Preparation; Dating; Courting; Getting to Know One Another's Character; Family Relations; Engagement)
 - Newly Married
 - Becoming Parents/Stepparents
 - Parenting Young Children
 - Parenting Adolescents
 - Empty-Nesting/Returning Children
 - Retiring/Elderly
 - Any time there is a strong test or difficulty
- 8.2 Love ebbs and flows, affected by attention, interactions, and circumstances. Knowledge of what to expect in marriage can support couples through the times when they are struggling and help them to sustain and strengthen their bond in the process. Couples may also need specific relationship-maintenance skills at each stage, especially the transition to parenthood. New parents need encouragement and support to nurture their marriage, while they also nurture their children.
- 8.3 Marriage Education can also help with some specific challenges in relationships. These include assisting cohabiting couples to separate or marry, estranged couples to rekindle unity, and stepfamilies/blended families to thrive.

SECTION 9: THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPY, LASTING MARRIAGES

- 9.1 Marriage Education gives couples the hope of being happy in marriage, without the conflict or disappointment common in many relationships today. Couples can learn important skills that allow them to communicate effectively as they raise and resolve most issues peacefully. The same major issues crop up in most relationships, regardless of religious convictions: children, money, in-laws, sex, housework, and time management. Couples can learn effective means to handle all of them. Couples can also learn to accept and move forward past the handful of unsolvable issues that exist in almost every relationship, so they are not constantly disrupting their marriages through resisting and arguing about what is unlikely to change.
- 9.2 Many couples may also need assistance from clergy/religious leaders with developing spiritual habits that can sustain marriages, such as attending worship services, marital and family prayer, reading religious texts, participating in community activities, and serving others.
- 9.3 Happy marriages and unified, intact families are a key part of the foundation for the success of any community. When a couple is happy, they are more likely to participate in civic or religious responsibilities. Most important, they are better able to fulfill their indispensable role as effective parents for the next generation.
- 9.4 Often couples approach clergy/religious leaders or counselors long after problems have begun, and the issues are, therefore, harder to address. Marriage preparation skills training starts couples off in married life with strong advantages, particularly knowing how to communicate effectively with one another and eliminate conflict. It provides skills in preventing marriage problems. Ongoing marriage enrichment education will then

help keep couples' marriages going more smoothly or help them know when to ask for assistance promptly and proactively.

- 9.5 Even when a couple's marriage is in trouble, most situations can be improved or even transformed with effective Marriage Education. This is, of course, if the couple is willing to acquire knowledge and practice new skills. Improvement can happen even if the couple has been married a long time or is in significant difficulties. Few situations are hopeless. Separation and divorce do not have to be automatic options, a common occurrence. Marriages can become happy, fulfilling, and lasting, even after challenging times.
- 9.6 A climate of unified support will encourage and strengthen marriages. This includes parents, in-laws, and friends encouraging and supporting couples, and clergy/religious leaders praying for marriages and families and being conscious of the responsibilities it places on couples that could interfere with couple and family time. Maintaining marriages takes the attention, love, and effort of all.

SUMMARY

To be sustainable, marriages require knowledge, effective skills, and family and community support. Strong and happy marriages and families contribute to the transformation of the global society. Creating and maintaining these in your community requires developing ways of delivering Marriage Education to your neighbors and friends and then out to other struggling couples and families throughout the world.

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**Note:** Many people are involved in strengthening and promoting marriage. One resource for this is The Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education (CMFCE) and their publication, "Strengthening Marriages in Your Community: 101 Ideas to Get You Started." Ordering information is at [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com).

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