



Competence-based Marriage and Relationship Education Program could be the Matrix for Relationship Durability

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Abstract

Divorce has been defying marriages successfully in the last six decades in most countries and cultures worldwide, making happiness an elusive state of contentment beyond the reach of couples. In Curacao for example, the rate of divorce is at a troubling 73%. Making discovering of the “epicenter” of divorce (figuratively speaking) of extremely importance. Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) or Couples Relationship Education (CRE) programs may be a potent alternative for mitigating the problem. MRE programs can put happiness within the grasp of every couple committed to development the 12 profiled relationship and family competencies for marital or relationship durability. This article aims to argue the pivotal role of Marriage and Relationship Education programs based on development of relationship Competence also referred to as Relationship Intelligence.

Keywords: Relationship Education; Marriage; Counseling; Couple

Importance and Objective of Marital Education Programs

MRE/CRE is the provision of information designed to help individuals and couples achieve long-lasting, happy, and successful marriages. It aims to impart knowledge, stimulate changes in attitude and teach the skills and behaviors needed to conduct successful intimate relationships [1-4]. It provides training to couples by means of courses, seminars, or counseling, assisting them in addressing potential problems and developing the knowledge, attitudes, expectations, and characteristics that are vital to creating a satisfying relationship [5]. MRE programs are considered to include both premarital education programs as well as marital education programs. Hence MRE programs are considered as an attempt of the professional to reduce marital dissatisfaction, marital instability, and the high divorce rate that dominates in many cultures.

MRE/CRE is important for several reasons:

1. It helps relationships succeed, by allowing the couples to acknowledge that relationships require work, addresses common marital problems, and builds supportive environment [6].
2. It significantly strengthens marriages and its impact tends to persist through a couple’s lifetime [7].
3. It prevents escalation of problems that typically require costly couple’s therapy and mitigates the collateral damage caused by distressed couples. Between 80% and 90% of divorcing couples in the US alone, report that they have not consulted with a therapist [8]. Thus, it appears that MRE is the only chance for many couples to prevent marriage problems.
4. MRE helps remediate problems and distress symptoms in early stages. It is probably easier for couples experiencing no or little distress to enhance their marriage than it is for those with severe relational

- problems to alter entrenched negative patterns [9].
5. Most couples experiencing problems do not seek professional help because they fear that treatment may do more damage, as it would not work, or would violate their privacy. Some even fear being stigmatized as a dysfunctional family unit.
 6. MRE increases marital satisfaction, contributes to better conflict-resolution skills, strengthens spousal commitment, and increases expressions of positive feelings and affections [10-13].
 7. It increases marital success by at least 30%, compared to the rates experienced by couples that do not participate in such programs.
 8. It tends to improve communication, dedication, and commitment between the partners, thus improving overall relationship quality.
 9. MRE prevents divorce and/or bad marriages (i.e., unhealthy or dysfunctional marriages) from occurring, by helping couples recognize their incompatibility prior to making the commitment [14].
 10. It has a significant complementary role in relationship development. "Choosing the right partner" has until now been considered the sole or major factor in lasting relationships. However, research shows that possessing the appropriate skills is as important as choosing one's partner wisely. In other words, choosing one's partner wisely is as important as being skilled in conducting marriage, because marriage is a skill-based relationship [15].
 11. MRE significantly improves consensus, satisfaction, affection, and cohesion for both distressed and non-distressed participants [16].
 12. By improving relationship skills, MRE tends, according to Falciaglia and Schindler [17], to produce many positive long-term effects, including reduced health cost, teen pregnancy, poverty, crime, incarceration, school drop-out rates, and other social maladies, which are related to distressed and divorced families.
 13. It helps families weather financial challenges [16,17].
 14. It improves sex lives of couples attending MRE programs [16].

Types and Models of Marital and Premarital Education Programs

Even though MRE programs have been proliferating in some part of the world such as the US (partially due to government funding), their effectiveness is still being questioned by some researchers. Livingston [18] argued against the consideration of MRE programs as the only effective approach to better or improved marital adjustment.

In a quasi-experimental design study, the brief Integrative Couples Counselling Model [19] was compared

with the conventional MRE program *PREPARE/ENRICH* [20]. No significant differences were found in the level of change in marital adjustment scores between the two treatment groups, not even when follow-up analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted on marital adjustment using demographics as co-variants. Gottman [21], Parrott [22], and Young [19] and Livingston [18], are also among the renowned experts on marriage and relationships who do not favor the sole MRE approach, advocating instead for support and combination model (i.e., marital education programs that include both counseling and marital education classes). While Livingstone's proposal and research suggest the potential benefits of such combination, other authors posit that the MRE approach is more effective than any other available model.

Busby, Ivey, Harris, and Ates [23] conducted a study, whereby they compared the effectiveness of three models of premarital education: (a) a workbook-only self-directed program; (b) a therapist-directed (unstructured) program; and (3) an assessment-based (*RELATE*) relationship enhancement program. The *RELATE* program was employed because it was deemed the most effective of the three inventories that received substantial attention in the research literature [24]—Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (*FOCCUS*); PRE-marital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (*PREPARE*) by Olson, Fournier, and Druckman (1996); and *RELATE* (Relationship Evaluation) by Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi [25]. From these three, according to Busby, et al. [23] and Larson et al. [9], *RELATE*, and their previous version *PREP_M*, offered the most thorough coverage of all the domains (e.g., emotional readiness, family background, effective communication, conflict resolutions, etc.) that are predictive of marital outcomes. The results of the comparison among the three models revealed significant differences in their effectiveness at the six-month follow-up. The assessment-based approach (*RELATE*) appeared to result in more influence on relationship success, compared to the therapist-directed and self-directed approaches. This was particularly the case in relation to specific problem areas, such as financial matters, communication, having and rearing children, decisions on who is in charge, time spent together, etc. Moreover, it was better than the therapist-directed program at improving communication and relationship satisfaction. According to the researchers, the participants indicated that the most helpful aspect of these programs was the opportunity to discuss previously ignored issues, along with the improvements in communication patterns.

In addition to this study, in February of 2005, the most rigorous of all the reviews to date was conducted by a team at the Urban Institute [4]. The team conducted an extremely extensive and systematic search and review that included

all the relevant studies, obtaining nearly 13,000 abstracts of research on marriage education, counseling, and therapy programs. Of these, 500 were selected for full review. Only 39 of these evaluations passed the rigorous screening for inclusion in the detailed meta-analysis. Some of the inclusion criteria were: goal of intervention, counterfactual treatment (whereby each study must have at least one treatment group and one no-treatment or wait-list control group), study quality (random sample selection or high quality quasi-experimental design), acceptable attrition rate (no more than 40 percent of the original sample, which was pre-and post-tested), etc. [26].

It is important to underline that the aforementioned study was not restricted to MRE programs, as just over half of the programs chosen were based on counseling and therapy offered to the distressed couples. The authors concluded that their findings “support evidence from previous narrative reviews and meta-analysis that a marriage and relationship program provide benefits for the couples they serve” (p. 23) [4]. Even though some cautious researchers considered it premature to conclude that extant studies provide adequate assessment of the field, it is evident that there are indications that MRE/CRE has the potential to improve and contribute to sustainable marriages. Without trivializing the contribution of counseling programs and laboratory investigations, it may still be safe to conclude that these approaches shed light that improves various MRE/CRE programs. Thus, such alternative models must not be considered as concurrent, but rather partners in the process of educating couples for sustainable marriage [27].

Hitherto all aforementioned MRE program and/or marital education intervention tended to be information and skilled based programs. However, lately competency based MRE are also being proposed to take the extant mitigation tools a step further. Whereas competency-based MRE focus on imparting knowledge, train skills and promote traits and address attitude, it makes it a more comprehensive approach, because most skilled based MRE do not address the four elements mentioned but focus on imparting knowledge and improve skills. It is noteworthy to mention that while couples could acquire the requisite knowledge and skills, if their attitudes are not addressed, significant and durable changes may not necessarily occur, simply because *knowing is not yet doing*. Therefore, it is imperative for MRE and CRE program designers to include the attitude change component through group dynamics, learning processes and exercises that foster attitude changes in couples attending their MRE/CRE programs. Competency by definition implies particular cohesion of *knowledge, traits, skills, and attitudes*. The MRE *Profile of Successful Couples/Families* is a competency-based MRE program derived from the Family Competence Training Model (FCTM). In this MRE program each topic or domain are

approached and treated from four angles: a) the knowledge that is needed; b) the right attitude that needs to be acquired or develop; c) the skills that must be developed; and d) the traits that are to be formed and at times corrected.

The FCTM is based on the premise that 12 competences are important contributors to the relationship quality and satisfaction, and can affect the level of commitment, satisfaction and durability of the relationship. Mastery of these pivotal 12 competences could also be considered as indicative of *relationship intelligence* which is the term use for couples who score high in managing the competencies. In sum, couples that possesses and/or develops these competences will thus increase the likelihood of enjoying a long-lasting relationship. The 12 pivotal and critical competences for long-lasting relations /marriages are:

1. Capacity to commit and maintain a relationship as it undergoes different phases.
2. Ability to nurture a relationship and effective management of emotions (i.e., emotional literacy), possessing stability and emotional/social intelligence, and the romantic skills or ability to remain committed and emotional engaged.
3. Adaptability and foresight, which implies being able to manage and cope in a competent way with the stages families undergo and the relationship life cycle, as well as ability to anticipate and deal with challenges and potential stressful situations;
4. Family management and leadership. This implies being able to create functional structure, assign tasks, and optimize the internal functioning.
5. Ability to understand and capacity to deal successfully with different personalities.
6. Competent communication and problem-solving capacity.
7. Management of gender differences.
8. Ability to foster, stimulates, and nurture healthy family characteristics.
9. Successful financial and/or resource management.
10. Capacity to consistently satisfy the partner sexually and manage intimacy.
11. Parenting capability.
12. Mastery of spirituality

A recent research report, were the impact of a newly developed marital competence-based relationship education (MRE) program has been assessed, the results were promising. The program “*Profile of Successful Couples/Families* which stems from FCTM has been recently evaluated. The sample of this study comprised 310 individuals, aged 19 to 63 years, residing in Curacao and Bonaire. Pre-assessment allowed these individuals to be separated into a distressed and adjusted group. Both the adjusted and the distress group were exposed to the competency-based MRE program (i.e.,

the intervention). A quasi-experimental Solomon design was adopted and was applied to both experimental and control groups. The gathered data was analyzed using the planned contrast for One-Way ANOVA, allowing pre- and post-intervention results achieved by each group to be compared.

See the following articles for detailed information regarding research design, MRE program validation and measurement instrument validation: “*Development and Validation of the Relationship Competence and Relationship Intelligence Assessment Scale*” and “*Profile of durable and successful marriages: A new competency-based marital education program*”.

The results yielded by these statistical tests indicate that the competency-based MRE program namely *Profile of Successful Couples/Families*, significantly increased (1) marital satisfaction, with the effect size of 2.18 for the adjusted group and 4.44 for the distressed group; (2) commitment, with the effect size of 1.98 and 2.90 for the adjusted and the distressed group, respectively; and (3) the 12 relationship competences, with the effect size of 1.62 and 6.27 for the adjusted and the distressed group, respectively.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the observed increases in relationship and family competences are linked to a simultaneous increase in marital satisfaction and commitment, which may improve marriage quality and durability. In sum, competence-based marital and relationship education program increases marital satisfaction, relationship commitment and level of mastery of family and relationship competences, which may contribute to longevity of relationships.

Summary of the Results of the Competency-Based MRE Program Named “Profile of Successful Couples/Families”

The MRE program’s outcome when relationship and family competences were analyzed separately (i.e., each competence individually) is summarized in Table 1, which presents the results of the analysis of each competence separately. Next the global results of e.g., distress group, when a paired t-test was conducted per competences.

Competence 1: Ability to commit, accompanied by leadership capacity and management-mastery of stages of marriage.

The couples’ scores on the *Inventory of Pivotal Competences for a Long-lasting Relationship* (a newly developed and validated instrument which reported a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .992) increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.60$ ($SD = 1.20$) to $M = 6.16$ ($SD = .47$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -16.92, p < .000$]. The effect size of this

change ($d = 1.732$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .652$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved the couples’ leadership capacity and the mastery and/or ability to successfully take a family member from one stage to the next.

Competence 2: Management of emotions, mastery of love concept and emotional intelligence —ability to nurture relationships. The couples’ scores increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.53$ ($SD = 1.09$) to $M = 6.01$ ($SD = .471$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -16.54, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.757$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .641$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples’ capacity to nurture a relationship, their mastery of love concept, and their emotional intelligence, in short, their capacity to manage emotions. Emotional Intelligence increase relates to increase in marital satisfaction and increase in level of commitment according to the findings in this research.

Competence 3: *Management of developmental stages/mastery of life cycle concept.* The couples’ scores improved from the initial mean of $M = 3.80$ ($SD = 1.387$) to $M = 5.74$ ($SD = .056$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -16.00, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.976$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .626$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples’ capacity to competently manage the developmental stages of family. In short, they improved their mastery of family life cycle.

Competence 4: *Family management, task/role management.* The couples’ scores augmented from the initial mean of $M = 3.43$ ($SD = 1.25$) to $M = 5.29$ ($SD = .729$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -16.00, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.818$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .626$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples’ capacity to manage competently their family, making plans, achieving established goals, sharing roles, managing time, etc.

Competence 5: Mastery of personality differences, ability to comprehend and nurture different personalities. The couples’ scores increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.59$ ($SD = 1.15$) to $M = 5.96$ ($SD = .528$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -15.23, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.527$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .603$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples’ capacity to master personality differences and nurture different personality and temperament types.

Competence 6: Effective communication and conflict resolution management.

The couples’ scores on the *Inventory of Pivotal Competences*

for a Long-lasting Relationship increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.46$ ($SD = 1.15$) to $M = 5.86$ ($SD = .431$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -14.81, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.608$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .598$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' capacity to communicate effectively and master conflict resolution competencies.

Competence 7: Mastery of gender differences management. The couples' scores improved from the initial mean of $M = 4.429$ ($SD = 1.52$) to $M = 5.97$ ($SD = .560$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -14.38, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.467$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .575$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' capacity to understand and manage gender differences.

Competence 8: Nurturing capacity that generate or stimulates emergence of the characteristics of a healthy family. In sum, generate healthy family characteristics.

The couples' scores augmented from the initial mean of $M = 4.12$ ($SD = 1.54$) to $M = 5.76$ ($SD = .512$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -13.49, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.429$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .543$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' nurturing capacity and capacity to generate the healthy characteristics that distinguish healthy families.

Competence 9: Resource and finance management. The couples' scores on the *Inventory of Pivotal Competences for a Long-lasting Relationship* increased from the initial mean of $M = 3.91$ ($SD = 1.52$) to $M = 5.60$ ($SD = .643$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -12.90, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.462$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .521$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' capacity to manage competently their resources and finances.

Competence 10: Sexuality and intimacy management - mastery of sexuality and intimacy. The couples' scores increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.99$ ($SD = .945$) to $M = 6.05$ ($SD = .526$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -14.68, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.375$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .585$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' capacity and mastery of their sexuality and intimacy in general.

Competence 11: Mastery of parenting competency. The couples' scores increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.82$ ($SD = 1.055$) to $M = 5.84$ ($SD = .680$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -12.69, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.150$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .513$.

This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' parenting competency or skills.

Competence 12: Religion and spirituality. The couples' scores on the *Inventory of Pivotal Competences for a Long-lasting Relationship* increased from the initial mean of $M = 4.95$ ($SD = 1.172$) to $M = 5.84$ ($SD = .615$) at the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed that the change was statistically significant [$t(153) = -12.01, p < .000$]. The effect size of this change ($d = 1.053$) was very strong, with $\eta^2 = .485$. This supports the conclusion that attending MRE improved couples' attitude towards religion and spirituality.

Initially a one-way ANOVA was used for hypothesis testing. The hypothesis which is the important one for this article states: "Couples who participate in the *Profile of Successful Couples/Families* program will demonstrate a significant positive increase in their relational competency skills, as measured by the *Inventory of Pivotal Competences for a Long-lasting Relationship*. See table 2 for better understanding of the Solomon's four group design used for data analysis.

The analysis yielded findings provide sufficient evidence to accept the hypothesis ($F(4, 367) = 562.140, p < .001$). In general, the model reported an Eta-squared of .839 and the power of 1.000 (based on $\alpha = .05$). According to the comparison results there is significant positive effect between the pre-test and the post-test results for marital competence of both experimental groups, i.e., the distressed group reported important significance differences ($t_{(85.727)} = 72.883, p < .001$), as did the adjusted group ($t_{(182.104)} = 11.590, p < .001$). The effect size for the distressed and adjusted group was 14.29 and 1.62. With respect to the above-mentioned hypothesis, the results pertaining to the control group revealed no significant differences between the pre- and the post-test scores ($t_{(125.784)} = .930, p = .354$). For detailed information regarding this research please consult the article: Profile of durable and successful marriages: A new competency-based marital education program.

When the follow-up measurement was conducted two years upon study completion, the findings pertaining to the adjusted group confirmed that the previously significant differences remained, confirming that the effects of the intervention (exposure to MRE program) were permanent. Moreover, the scores for family and relationship competences increased slightly ($t_{(140.039)} = 2.125, p = .035, ES = .33$), when compared with the post-test scores obtained two years prior. For the distressed group, the follow-up results also indicated that the changes were permanent. However, a significant (albeit small) decrease was noted in permanency of the level of mastery of the competences ($t_{(39.964)} = 2.036, p = .048, ES = .50$). Additionally, when the post-test scores of the adjusted group, the distressed group, and the post-test only with

intervention group were compared, there were no significant differences. This indicated that these groups have achieved the same level of improvement in their marital competencies

solely due to the intervention, rather than some other confounding factors or variables. Observe the figure below for more insight regarding the Solomon's design used.

MRE Program outcome according to each relationship and family competence								
Measure	Pre Test M SD	Post Test M SD	Df	t value	Sig	Effect Size Cohen	Effect size/ η^2 =Eta square	Power
Leadership, ability maintain commitment & Management of Stages of Marriage	4.60 1.20	6.16 .47	153	-16.92	0	1.732	0.652	1
Management of Emotion, Mastery of Love Concept and Emotional Intelligence - Ability to Nurture Relationship	4.53 1.09	5.29 .729	153	-16.54	0	1.757	0.641	1
Management of Developmental Stages /Life Cycle	3.80 1.387	5.74 .056	153	-16	0	1.976	0.626	1
Family Management, Task /Role Management & Planning	3.43 1.25	5.29 .729	153	-16	0	1.818	0.626	1
Mastery of Personality Differences — Ability to Comprehend and Nurture Different Personality	4.59 1.15	5.96 .528	153	-15.23	0	1.527	0.603	1
Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution Management/Mastery	4.46 1.15	5.86 .431	153	-14.81	0	1.608	0.598	1
Mastery of Gender Difference Management, i.e., Competence in Managing Gender Differences	4.29 1.52	5.97 .560	153	-14.38	0	1.467	0.575	1
Nurturing Capacity – Production of Characteristics of a Healthy Family	4.12 1.54	5.76 .512	153	-13.49	0	1.429	0.543	1
Resources and Finance Management – Competence in Mastery of Resources	3.91 1.52	5.60 .643	153	-12.9	0	1.462	0.521	1
Sexuality and Intimacy Management – Mastery of Sexuality	4.99 .945	6.05 .526	153	-14.68	0	1.375	0.585	1
Mastery of Parenting Competency	4.82 1.055	5.84 .680	153	-12.69	0	1.15	0.513	1
Religious and Spiritual Mastery	4.95 1.172	5.94 .615	153	12.01	0	1.053	0.485	1

Table 1: Summary of results (MRE program outcome pre and post intervention).

The Solomon Four-Group Design					
	Group	Pre-obs.	Indep. Var.	Post-obs.	Follow-up after 2 years
(S)	E1	O1	X	O2	O3
(S)	E2	O1	X	O2	O3
(S)	C1	--	X	O2	
(S)	C2	O1	--	O2	
(S)	C3	--	--	--	O1

Table 2: Solomon's four group design.

Notes: S – sample; E1 –experimental group adjusted; E2 - Experimental group distress; C1 – Control group Post-Test Only with Intervention; O - observation or pre-tested and post-tested; Indep. Var -independent variable or experiment; C2 -control group with no intervention. C3 -control group with no pre-test and no intervention-only posttest after 2 years. The dependent variable was Development of Marital and Relationship Competences.

Conclusion

Lack of family or relationship competences could be related to the absence of marital satisfaction and commitment, resulting in marriage meltdown. In order to ultimately mitigate the growing prevalence of divorce, Relationship Education Program geared toward the development of relationship and family competences could be instrumental in providing couples with pertinent tools for durability and longevity. Competence-based MRE could empower and strengthen the marital or relationship's immune system, so that the couple could be better equipped to handle the risk factors that could lead to divorce. Competence-based MRE attempt to moves beyond skill-based content MRE by addressing cognitive, skill, behavioral and attitude aspects.

The *Profile of Successful Couples/Families* program, by addressing the previously mentioned aspects, has reported improvements in marital satisfaction, level of commitment, and level of mastery of competences for a wide range of couples, in terms of ages and years of marriage.

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