

PREP's Relationship Education Best-Practice Guidance

We are frequently asked our opinion about best strategies for providing relationship education services. These guidelines reflect the general advice we have given over the years. Throughout, you will recognize that there are trade-offs in areas of best practice. As you make decisions about your own program, you have to decide things such as what the relative benefits are of serving more people with a smaller dose versus giving the best reasonable dose to fewer people, what format works best for those you intend to serve, and who and how many instructors you will have running workshops. Hence, while we believe there are best practices, best practices really amount to desirables to grapple with as you decide what you are able to actually provide and to whom. We designed this document to tell you what we believe and to identify some of the important dimensions program leaders have to make decisions about as they decide how to field relationship education services and get impact.

Overview

We believe that the most significant decisions a program makes regarding the delivery of relationship education services are on the following dimensions:

- Choice of population to be served and efforts to reach them effectively
- Curricula
- Providers/instructors/coaches
- Dose
- Format
- Delivery: Quality and Fidelity

Choice of Population Served and Strategies to Reach Them

This document is focused on the curricula side of effect efforts or programs to reach and help individuals and families through relationship education strategies. As such, we will only note the extreme importance of this category. Clearly, best practices also include a range of decisions, systems, and procedures to accomplish the overarching goal of serving a given population for a specific set of aims. We only list the major categories where what you do will matter tremendously but do not provide further detail on this immensely important category.

- Clarity about who are you trying to serve and why
- Recruitment strategies
 - How will you reach those you want to serve? How do you get to where they are to help them know where you are?
 - What external systems and groups can help your reach?
 - Will you employ active recruiters?
- Retention strategies
 - Will you provide incentives (above and beyond doing good work in providing services) for participation?

- There are a number of providers, groups and teams in the U.S. that have constructed amazingly thoughtful systems of retention. Have you considered getting technical assistance from them? We discuss technical assistance briefly below with regard to curricula services and delivery. It can also be very useful when it comes to getting the best advice on systems of recruitment and retention.
- Other sources of service and support that you can help people reach

Curricula

Several factors should be considered when selecting curricula:

- Is what you are considering using research-based? What does it really mean to be research-based? The elements of the strongest research-based model would include the following three best practices:
 - Being *Empirically Informed*: Are the strategies and materials informed by theory and empirical findings?
 - This means that a wide and deep knowledge of the existing literature in the areas covered by a curriculum has informed the selection or development of the intervention content and strategies. There is a particular amount of expertise involved in knowing important research findings and deciding how those may be applied to help those the curriculum is intended to serve.
 - Being *Empirically Tested*: Have versions or aspects of the intervention been tested in rigorous evaluations?
 - More established approaches will have been tested over many years, and often by a variety of different research teams and in various settings.
 - Where there is a large body of studies related to an approach, it is likely that not all findings will be significant or large, or across all dimensions where one might desire to see change. The best question to ask if this is important to your group is if there is a consistent and growing knowledge base with evidence of impact or findings that can support the growth and refinement of the approach (see next bullet). Often, the developers of a mature, research-based approach will talk circumspectly about the body of findings related to their approach because they are aware of a range and mix of findings from a variety of settings that support an awareness of strengths and weaknesses as well as ongoing questions about how to accomplish the aims of the curriculum more effectively. In contrast, it is not hard to find groups strongly touting their evidence base when there may be no published studies or only one poorly implemented study lacking long term follow-up, a control group, and a program that had very little contact time with the participants. This does not mean such a program is not effective or a good choice for your work, but there are

certain characteristics of an approach and a team that is acting on a long-term commitment to empiricism.

- Being *Regularly Refined*: Are materials and strategies regularly refined and updated based on the growing body of knowledge implied by the prior to features of best practice, research-based interventions?
 - Knowledge is not standing still. New research in basic science about relationships, families, and special populations is coming out daily.
 - New information is returning from the field of use, provided there is a team regularly interacting with and listening to those using their curricula.
 - The best efforts in curricula are not static but the developers attempt to regularly revise, update, and refine methods to achieve the aims of the curricula. These efforts are not cosmetic (or are not merely cosmetic). We refer here to actual refinements in the approach and delivery to attempt to always be improving the potential effectiveness of an approach.
- Quality of the team providing training in, and support for, the curricula
 - Does the team have researchers, experts in their fields, involved in development?
 - Does the team have pedagogical experts (those who have studied and understand current best-practices for teaching styles and methods)?
- Quality of materials
 - Are the materials up-to-date?
 - Are the materials attractive and easy-to-use by participants?
- Match of curricula materials, style, and themes to program goals and audience

Providers/Instructors

Some types of relationship education models require that the instructors have certain credentials, such as an advanced degree in mental health and experience in doing therapy. Most, however, do not have such requirements, nor does PREP. What seems most important to us is that instructors have characteristics such as excellent interpersonal skill, engaging teaching style, and a strong knowledge of the nature of the lives and issues of those being served. The latter is important so that your instructors can help make the material come alive for the participants by his/her knowledge of issues they face, use of anecdotes and metaphors appropriate to their lives, and ability to have an easy rapport based in respect for the participants. In addition, good leaders must be structured, active, reinforcing and be able to instill hope for positive change in relationships if program guidelines are followed.

Dose

There are no definitive studies on the optimal dose of relationship education. This is because studies have not compared groups based on randomly assigned participants to receive varying lengths of services. There is a lot known about dose based on what was

provided in different studies. The problem with that knowledge is that sometimes people have different doses for reasons that make it hard to infer what more or less dose means. For example, in services where people can attend more or less based on interest, the most motivated and committed couples may attend more hours of training. They may not be the couples who could use the most help. At the same time, some couples who are more distressed may attend more services precisely because they need more help. So, even where a program offers a fixed number of sessions over time, actual attendance may be impacted by the motivation and need of the participants. These variables make it hard for researchers who study relationship education to determine exactly what number of hours produces the best result, and for whom.

Having said that, we believe that enough is known to establish general suggestions about dose based on the available literature, especially research from meta-analyses (Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, & Albright, 2012). Based on what is known:

- There is reasonable evidence that 8 hours of services provides some consistent effects. We would also note that it is very hard to provide 8 hours of training in a one day workshop. One day models are very effective for reaching large numbers of people but one must accept the trade-off of having less impact than one might see with more hours and sessions over time (see next section on format).
- There is wide consensus that there is a sweet spot at 12 hours of services. Evidence suggests increases in impact from 12 hours on up to 18 hours or more.

Format

There are a variety of formats that have been used over the history of this field. Here are some examples.

- Weekly sessions: for example, six 2-hour sessions over six weeks, or four 2.5-hour to 3-hour sessions.
- Weekend retreats: for example, Friday evening, Saturday day, Sunday morning
- One day plus weekend
- Two one-day workshops: for example, 9 to 4 on a Saturday or week day.
- Half-day workshops: for example, afternoon session on one day of the week

There is not a body of research that allows for any definitive statements about what is most effective as to format. We believe that sessions spread out over time are likely the most effective for most participants. However, what research there is on this subject has not shown a difference in impacts between a 6-week session format and a weekend retreat format. Nevertheless, if possible, we believe that sessions spread over time is likely to give the best result because people have time to absorb and tryout what they are learning while they are still being helped by your program.

There are trade-offs when deciding on formats. One set involves what is possible with those you serve, your facilities, agencies you work with, and your resources. A second set involves what those you serve are most interested and willing to complete. Colleagues

have reported to us that 4 weeks in a weekly session model (with 2 or 3 hours in each session) may be optimal for keeping peoples' attention (and willingness to come back) and spreading out the training.

Delivery Quality and Fidelity

Program developers and funders are typically concerned that services be provided in the best manner possible that is reasonably feasible regarding staff, facilities, and participant access. Program quality is dependent upon several factors.

Working Alliance. There is extensive literature in the field of relationship therapy showing that the quality of the relationship between therapists and clients is an important part of how positive impacts come about. Factors like perceiving that the therapist cares, understands, and understands the goals of the client go into overall ratings of the quality of the working alliance. Research on this dynamic in the area of relationship education is relatively new. However, one published study documents how the quality of the working alliance between relationship education instructors and participants plays a role in the effectiveness of the services provided (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Thus, a program that plans to be effective in these types of services will hire and assure that the instructors they are using to provide relationship education are able to connect well with their audience.

Fidelity. In the context of relationship education, fidelity refers to whether or not the providers of relationship education adhere to the methods and materials built into the curriculum being used. Thus, conducting relationship education with high fidelity would include the following:

- Covering the major themes, ideas, strategies, and skills from the curriculum, as intended
- Including activities and opportunities for practicing what is being taught as recommended by the developers
- Not introducing ideas and systems of thought from other sources when presenting a particular curriculum: good presenters often use examples or ideas from various sources but for high fidelity, should refrain from doing so where it interferes with, undermines, or supplants content meant to be presented by the developers.
- Providing participants with the official materials designed to be used with the curriculum (participant workbooks, handouts, etc.)

Fidelity can be generally achieved while also adapting the teaching to a particular audience. The best instructors use examples pertinent to the lives of their participants, adapt examples as they teach to fit their audience, and adjust other aspects of content or experience where they believe the fit between the curriculum and the audience can be strengthened. Such steps can be taken while preserving an overall high fidelity to the curriculum as it was meant to be used.

PREP has checklists and other tools that can be used to improve (or assess) program fidelity on very basic dimensions (for most but not all of its curricula).

Number of Instructors. We believe two instructors, working together during workshop sessions, is optimal. Our curricula at PREP can be used with one instructor in the room but, if a program can afford to provide two, there are great benefits. First, different instructors will tend to have different strengths, and can work together to provide the best overall experience for providers. Two, it can be tiring to keep track of everything going on in the room and two heads are better than one at keeping things moving and monitoring how people are doing. Third, with two instructors, you can trade off on taking the lead in presenting content, and the one not presenting at the moment, can check off that the other has covered the essential content of the unit being taught.

Use of Coaches. In the early days of research on PREP, we always had at least one coach to work with every couple during the skills training/practice aspects of the program. That obviously is not possible for many programs these days, due to person power and costs (though, we found plenty of volunteers who would do this for free). In some work, we recommended that instructors try to provide one coach for every two or three couples in the room, where they can go back and forth between couples and keep them moving in terms of practicing the skills. Even without using any coaches, it is imperative that the instructor(s) go around the room during activities and skills practice periods to check on people, offer advice, nudge those who need nudging, and encourage people as they try out new behaviors. As such, it is all the more valuable if you can arrange to have two instructors rather than just one—at least for sessions that involve a lot of skills training.

Whether you are using separate coaches or not as you provide relationship education, we have a set of guidelines for best practice when coaching couples in learning skills taught in PREP curricula.

You can obtain that file here: (<https://app.box.com/s/ilhkvwqcjii9a2gwkp7lz1fjepd5h25>)

You can also read about the STAR model for good coaching (Structured, Active, Thoughtful and Reinforcing) in [Markman & Ritchie \(2015\)](#).

Technical Assistance

Experts at PREP are able to provide technical assistance in the form of advice and consultation on any of the matters raised in this document. We can provide brief examples of ideas during the trainings that we provide for our curricula or programs can contract with us for limited or extensive technical assistance and guidance as they set up and run their operations.

To learn more about options for technical assistance from PREP, call or write to us and ask for Maggie Corcoran:

1-800-366-0166

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Papers by Scholars Associated with PREP on Issues and Best Practices in the Field of Relationship Education

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- Stanley, S. M., & Rhoades, G. K. (2009). Marriages at risk: Relationship formation and opportunities for relationship education. In H. Benson and S. Callan (Eds.), *What works in relationship education: Lessons from academics and service deliverers in the United States and Europe* (pp. 21 - 44). Doha, Qatar: Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

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